

Aligning Pet Expectations With Reality

1. Preparation

The decision to acquire a pet should be considered by all members of the family. Everyone should ask themselves, "Why do I want and desire a pet?" Are we prepared to give our pet a good home? Pets need to become part of the family. Do you want a pet to be inside your home and partake in family activity? Separation and isolation cause emotional problems. Do you know the typical behavior expected from your desired pet? Dog breeds are selectively bred for certain functions and they have different exercise, training, and grooming requirements. The trick in selecting a pet is to know what to expect from the typical behavior of the pet you favor and to match those characteristics and behaviors with your family's life style and living situation. How will your pet be cared for when you go on vacation?

2. Are You A First-Time Owner

Research indicated first-time adopters place the pet at greater risk of relinquishment because they do not anticipate undesirable behaviors and are not aware of successful techniques in eliminating them.

3. The Training Imperative

It will take time for a pet to adapt and be trained to it's new home. How will you teach the pet the rules of the house? Chewing, barking, digging and house soiling are common dog behaviors. Scratching and litter box problems are common in cats. They can continue and become annoying and bothersome unless the pet receives basic training modification. Can your family accept this and be patient, kind and consistent during the teaching process? Are you committed to working out problems when they occur? Training should start the moment you bring the pet into the home. Pets need to make positive associations at a young age to feel confident and well adjusted around other dogs and humans. Everyone in the household should train the pet, not just the primary care giver. Every person must be consistent. Children should learn to respect your pet and the pet should be taught to respect the child.

4. Time, Energy Commitment

Adult attachment depends, in part, on the time and energy available to the adult and the amount of nurturing required by the pet(s). Time constraints are often realized after the pet is obtained. Regular duties, like walking the dog, became time consuming and difficult, especially for children. Do you have enough time and energy for daily pet care activities? Pets require food, water, exercise, grooming care and companionship every day of their life. Surveys indicate the average owners spend two hours a day to feed, train, groom, play, exercise and clean up after their pets. Pets enjoy and need the interaction. Will you provide the time or will it become an annoyance or burden?

5. Costs of Pet Ownership

Have you considered the costs involved in caring for a dog, like a license, food, training, equipment, grooming supplies, toys and medical care that includes spay/neuter surgery? (Minimum \$300 per year.)

6. Parent Responsibility

If you are a parent, is the sole reason you want a dog to teach your preschool or grade school child to be a responsible, loving and emotionally sensitive person? Are you looking for a pet "toy" for your child? Researchers tell us there are many dogs returned to the shelter because "It just did not work out." Be realistic. It is a job for adults.

According to researchers Kidd, Kidd and George, "The responsibility for and caretaking of pets usually becomes the mother's obligation regardless of initial plans. Therefore, where parents expect the pet to teach the child responsibility and caretaking and the child does not learn and display these behaviors, the parents usually regret adopting the pet and frequently reject or abandon it" (Psychological Reports, 1992, 70, 547-561).

7. Landlord Permission

Do you have permission from your landlord, preferably in writing? Fewer and fewer rental units accept pets. Do you know the condo rules regarding pets? What will you do if you have to move? Will you make the commitment to take the dog with you?

8. Home Compatibility

Most dogs and cats want to be in the home with the family. Extended periods of isolation will cause emotional problems. Can you keep the cat confined indoors? Can you bring your dog indoors a majority of the time? Do you have other pets at home? Will one more be too much? Will they get along? Do you have enough space to house the pet(s) properly? How will you keep the pet confined? Certain dogs are better equipped for life in a large suburban home than in an apartment. Free-roaming dogs are a nuisance to neighbors, endanger the dog and violate the law. It's cruel to chain a dog in a confined area and it often leads to behavior problems.

9. Health and Annoyance Concerns

Does anyone in your family have allergies that may be provoked by pet hair? Will you mind the constant fight to control hair shedding, fleas and odors, or will they annoy or burden you?

10. Responsible Ownership

Will you be a responsible pet owner and spay/neuter you're pet before they are 6 months of age. Will you provide vaccinations, identification, visit a veterinarian regularly, obey all laws and forge a good pet citizen?

11. Commitment

Are you committed to keep and care for your pet its entire life, even when you move and your life style changes? Unintentional Owners and good Samaritans acquire pets and think of the pet as a temporary guest. "I am just keeping the animal until I can find it a good home." They were not seeking a pet but acquiesced when petitioned by other people or an orphaned animal came into their life. Be committed to working out all ownership problems that prevent you from enjoying your pet. Do you understand once you adopt your pet the responsibility is for life — and your pet's life depends on it.

12. Love Your Pet

Pets need to be part of the human pack. Do you want a pet to be part of your household? Sleep near you? Will you pet and stroke your pet daily? Will you display or carry a picture of your pet? Research indicates that the chance of relinquishment will be minimal if you bond with your pet.

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