

Holiday Pets

The scene is a romantic one, straight out of a Disney movie. Open the gaily wrapped box under the Christmas tree and out pops a puppy or kitten wrapped in a bright red bow. The children squeal with delight as the puppy licks their face or a kitten bats at a Christmas ornament. Although this vision may dance like sugar plums, it's not a sweet one. Bringing a new pet home for the holidays is not a wise move.

Presenting a pet to the family along side toys and clothes gives the wrong message. Pets are not things; rather they are living creatures we invite to share our lives. They must not be purchased as though they are the latest video game to be tossed aside when they are no longer new and exciting. They cannot be discarded and ignored when life gets too busy.

One of the lessons we hope to teach our children by adding a family pet is responsibility. This begins with how we set the stage for the new pet to enter our home. The decision to bring a pet into the home is best made with the entire family. Parents should layout the efforts that will be involved in caring for the chosen pet. Everyone needs to be fully aware of what their role will be and understand that they have accepted responsibility for another life. We need to show that we consider caring for a pet a big responsibility and one that should be carefully considered.

But perhaps now is the perfect time for adding an animal friend to the family. The addition of a pet can still be a Christmas surprise if done in the right fashion. In place of a live animal, box up a stuffed one to be opened on Christmas morning. You can wrap up the new pet's cage or bedding, food items and toys. After the excitement of unwrapping presents, gather the family to discuss the new member of the family. Talk about who will take responsibility for the different care giving tasks. This might be a good time to draw up a chore chart and discuss how to help your future pet adjust to the routine of your family life. Set a date for picking your new family member up from the breeder or shelter.

Children can learn empathy and compassion as they care for the family pet. Before the pet comes home, the family should consider the needs of the pet, what would make him feel happy and create a welcoming environment. Together you can talk about proper nutrition, shelter, exercise and enrichment activities your new pet will require to live an optimal life. Parents can help their children to be empathetic and to understand how difficult this change can be for their pet by asking them to envision going to a new school with none of their current friends. Although it can be an exciting adventure, it can also be very frightening until they become familiar with a new routine and make

new friends. Understanding the apprehension their pet may feel will help the children to move slowly and quietly when their pet first arrives and to allow their new pet some time to become adjusted.

Family pets teach our children so many life lessons; responsibility, compassion, patience, empathy, self-esteem, unconditional love. The value of these lessons begins before our companion comes into our homes. It is established when we show our children how we value each and every living being. Inviting an animal into our lives is a true blessing, one that will be cherished for many years. By our actions, we can exemplify the significance of nature and of our animal friends. This is a gift worth giving this holiday season and one that will last a lifetime.