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Panic!



Two of the most dreaded questions children ask their parents are:

- Where do babies come from?
- Please, oh please can we get a dog?

These questions seem to be inbred into all kids. And the usual parent response is—panic. Since you are reading this, it is safe to assume that the second question has cropped up at least once in your family's dinnertime discussions. If you have ever loved a dog, perhaps you understand your child's desire to own one. If you have not owned a dog or your view about dog ownership is generally negative, you will have to give the matter some objective thought before you can consider your child's request.

Owning a dog can be a wonderful experience that opens a child's mind to previously unknown pleasures—the pleasure of loving a living being; the pleasure of providing good care; the pleasure of seeing the world through a dog's eyes, which is a more down-to-earth, instinctual approach to life—all of which may help to ground your child in a world that is demanding a lot of him or her.

The right dog with the right child can be a wonderful partnership of fun, love, and understanding. That is the experience you can seek for your child.

The Magic of Children and Dogs

There is something magical about children and dogs. They have been depicted together for as long as artists have been painting portraits. Children are attracted to the unconditional love dogs give so freely. Many children delight in the way a dog can offer them complete attention. Parents, siblings, and teachers may be busy or distracted, but a dog gives the present of his presence in a way that is completely satisfactory and fulfilling. Dogs are willing to be companions and protectors of children. There are few sights as heartwarming as that of a child, sound asleep, with his arm around his dog. For outgoing, energetic children, a dog can provide a loyal playmate, one who will run with him and investigate the world. For lonely or book-loving children, a dog gives a reason to go out and exercise and possibly even make friends with someone else who has a dog. A dog will chase sticks or balls, or trot along at your feet, and can make the whole world fun.

Dogs can be the source of many lessons. From observing the behavior of his dog, a child can learn respect for others, acceptance, love, and empathy. Children will also learn that the world is not always fair, and sometimes it is necessary to go home and lick your wounds. Dogs live only in the present, not in memories from the past or anticipation of the future. So no matter what happens to them, as soon as they regain their equilibrium dogs are back to being happy, tail-wagging creatures, looking for fun or a pat on the head. Dogs naturally possess a positive outlook on life, which has proven to be a great help to children who feel sad or depressed.

In taking care of their dogs, children can learn responsibility, commitment, and how to handle a position of authority in a loving way. Kids who have dogs are usually more compassionate and more gentle than kids without them.

Janet Willmann, an elementary schoolteacher, says, "I know for a fact that animals develop responsibility in a child. I often bring my Whippet, Indy, to school. It amazes me to see how the presence of the dog settles the kids. They are more kind and gentle to each other when he is around. A dog is a great friend to a child. He can be a good listener as well as a great playmate."

Unconditional Love

"Growing up with a dog teaches kids unconditional love," says dog breeder Wendy Jones. "It teaches them respect. I think growing up with a dog can also help kids be more social. I grew up with dogs, but my husband didn't. It took meeting mine and then having one of his own to break through a twenty-year fear of dogs, and now he is the happiest dog person I've ever seen. If only he'd been more exposed to dogs when he was younger, he would have learned more about the loving side of himself. It breaks my heart to see children run or shriek in fear of a strange dog because they've never had the delight of owning one, and their parents have never taken the time to teach them to love animals."

Dog owner Renée Clayton says, "I believe I am a better person *because* I was raised with dogs. I learned how to be caring, patient, and responsible. I feel it is a loss to a child *not* to have a pet as a companion. Loving a dog teaches a child how to love someone other than themselves. I would also like to believe I am smarter, because I had to out-think the dogs in my life!"

Another dog owner, Jennifer Penman, says, "Like me, owning a dog could help a nine or ten-year old overcome shyness. Taking a dog to obedience classes gets you out of your shell. You have to become a leader of your little pack of two. I became so much more confident after I got my dog. He looked up to me, and I felt that I had to show him that everything was all right. And while I was acting that way, it became easier for me to talk to other kids."

Life is constantly changing, and today we live in a world where some families have become "decentralized." The family unit is not quite as interconnected as it once was. Dual-income families are the standard. This places more stress on parents, who often worry about providing enough love, time, guidance, and support to their kids. Although the majority of parents actually manage quite well, the reality is that children, who require and thrive on unconditional love, get less of it than they did twenty years ago.



Please, oh please can I have this puppy?

Those families who are able to participate together in the care and raising of a dog introduce a heightened feeling of love in their homes that children benefit from immensely. Marketing expert Chuck Carroll says, "A kid today, due to no fault of his parents, goes through childhood with a little bit less than we had, in terms of loving connections. A dog can take up the slack by leaving important, positive, emotional impressions at a time and in a world where diminished intimacy can be a child's greatest loss."

As an added benefit, recent medical studies suggest that children who grow up in a home with animals have fewer allergies as adults. The theory so far is that reg-

ular exposure to the allergens associated with pets stimulates the immune system and heads off allergic reactions later in life.

The Commitment of Dogs

As wonderful as dogs are, they are a family responsibility—one that needs to be shared, rather than foisted upon a child. Many families already manage too much responsibility, and dogs probably should not be added to the list. Owning a dog means having stewardship of a living being, one who is totally dependent on you to provide for his care. It is not the same as buying a car. You cannot leave it to rust in the yard and then trade it in for a new model when some of the luster has worn off.

Many people have fond memories of childhood. They forget that usually mom was home all the time and there were fewer activities for kids after school. They get a puppy, don't train him, he becomes a bother, and they all soon tire of the pup. He then ends up at the local shelter.

Ten Things about Kids and Dogs

These reasons a child benefits from having a dog come from Donna Rotman Miner in Coventry, Connecticut.

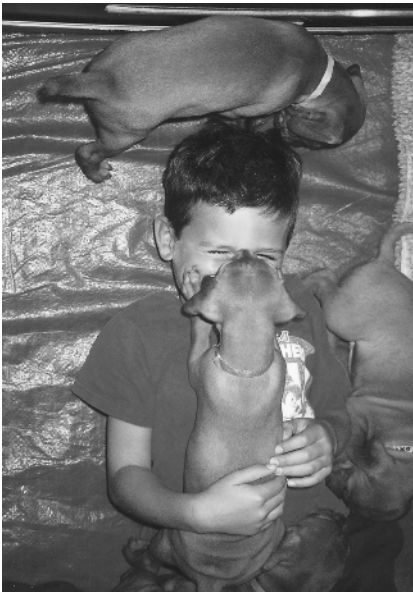
1. Kids learn about unconditional love.
2. Kids learn patience.
3. Kids learn to value life.
4. Dogs help kids understand the life cycle, including death.
5. Dogs help kids develop empathy for another being.
6. Kids learn how to communicate with another being in a way that does not include force.
7. Young children who have pets are less likely to have asthma and allergies.
8. A dog can help a child who suffers from depression.
9. A dog is always a shoulder to cry on and someone to love.
10. A dog is a good way to get rid of your peas when your parents aren't looking.

During the discussion about getting a dog, the whole family needs to be aware that together you are making a commitment that will last for more than a decade. As in any relationship, a commitment needs to be complete and ongoing. Parents must work with their children on responsibility issues, but they also must be realistic. Children's chores should be divided and age appropriate. It is unfair to expect a five-year-old child to clean up the yard, but it is not unreasonable to expect a nine-year-old to do so. Even with cooperative kids, some chores will be the parents' responsibility. So before you do anything else, ask yourself this question: Am I willing to take over the day-to-day chores when the novelty of the puppy wears off? This question is especially for you, mom, because unfair as it is, the responsibilities of dog care often fall disproportionately onto you.

Kids—even the best kids—need help with the dog’s feeding, walking, bathing, and vet appointments. The parents will have to pitch in on these jobs to some extent, no matter how much the kids claim otherwise. You cannot let the kids neglect the dog just to teach them a lesson about responsibility, because this is unfair to your dog.

Fran Chaput Waksler, a professor of sociology at Wheelock College in Boston who studies children’s perspectives, says, “Some children simply want a dog, some even want one desperately. That strikes me as an excellent reason for them to have one. But one flaw I see in advice often given about children and dogs is that the child should be responsible for the dog. I strongly disagree. I think the responsibility is ultimately the adult’s, and it is naive to think otherwise. Recognizing this from the outset will avoid problems for the adult, the child, and the dog. Dogs are not teaching tools; they are family members.”

She recalls, “I was given a dog at age five, not long after my father died. It was the best gift in the world. As I look back, I realize that as a child I had no responsibility for the dog; others fed him and let him out, and my job was to love him. As I got older, I took on more of the care just because it seemed the right thing to do for my dog.”



These Vizsla puppies will be around for more than a decade and will need consistent love and care.

Dogs are very time-consuming. Adding a dog is in many ways like adding another child to your family. He is like a child who stops growing mentally at the human equivalent of four years old, yet needs continual care for his entire lifetime—which may be twelve years or more. A dog cannot be treated like a pair of shoes, passing him on when he no longer suits you. He is an animal with feelings and attachments. It’s not fair to the dog, and it most definitely teaches your kids the wrong lesson about commitment, love, and respect for other living things.

Help for Geeks and Nerds

“Speaking from experience, having a dog as a kid was one of the best things that ever happened to me,” says experienced Whippet breeder Annie Whitney. “At age eight I got my first Whippet, but I was too young to take care of it. Our family got a second Whippet two years later. That second Whippet was mine. No matter what his papers may have said, he was my best friend.

“Throughout junior high and high school, I was your typical nerd/geek/loner, so I had few friends to hang out with. But I always had my dog. I could have had the worst day, but I always counted on Walter to be there for me. I would talk to him and tell him all that was going on—stuff no kid would say to their parents. And without a ton of friends, having the dog there was a big stress reliever. Those school years can be the worst for any kid.”

“When selling a dog to someone with kids, I make sure the parents want the dog, too, and don’t just think they are getting a living toy,” says Annie Whitney, a Whippet breeder.

If both parents are not in agreement about a dog, the chance of having a successful relationship is jeopardized. You would be well advised to wait until all family members are ready for a dog.

The Research

When you decide to go ahead with dog ownership, you will also need to explore which breed and which dog is right for you. A dog is not a surprise gift. As most breeders will tell you, picking out the right dog is a very personal matter. The potential owner of the dog has to make sure that, yes, this is the right dog for me. You don’t want to bring home a surprise Chihuahua, only to learn that your child’s heart was set on a German Shepherd.

Through my years of rescue work, it has become apparent that people jump into dog ownership with too little thought and preparation. In the



As Mel and Becca prove, the right dog can be a perfect companion for every member of the family.

end, the family is unhappy and the dog is turned over to the nearby shelter in search of a new home. Unfortunately, for many dogs life ends there.

With proper education and preparation, the stresses and concerns of buying a dog can be greatly reduced. To assist you on the road to dog ownership, I will address the most frequently asked questions and attempt to provide answers. This book will introduce issues that people seldom think about when they get a family pet. Hopefully, you will gain insight and education to use in your decision-making process.