

## University of Missouri Extension

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# Giving or Receiving Pets: An Owner's Responsibility

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Are you planning to give a puppy or kitten to someone as a gift? Or do you suspect someone will be giving you one? If the answer is yes, you must first consider some important points.

Owning a pet can be a wonderful experience, but it does involve responsibilities that you should understand before you give or obtain a pet, not after.

First, consider the basic obligation involved. Anyone obtaining a dog or cat as a pet accepts a responsibility for that animal's care and existence for the rest of its life. This can average more than 10 years with proper care.

If there's any hint that long-term care cannot be provided, a pet should not be given or received. People need and want pet dogs and cats for various reasons. The basic reason for owning a pet dog or cat is for the companionship and love it can provide to individuals.

Fortunately, most people own dogs and cats for companionship. However, nearly 20 percent of all pet owners at any time are considered dissatisfied. These people view the pet as a nuisance.

When a pet has been given to children it is received enthusiastically — at first. Often, when the pet becomes an adult and loses puppy or kitten cuddly appeal, it receives little attention or affection from family members.

## Pet expenses

Another important point to consider when giving or receiving a dog or cat as a gift is the expense involved. The initial purchase price occurs only one time and is a minor expense compared to the continual costs.

The estimated cost of owning a 30-pound dog the first year is around \$225. This figure includes licenses, vaccinations, neutering and food. After the first year, the yearly estimated cost of owning a 30-pound dog is about \$150.

The cost for a cat the first year is about \$165 with each succeeding year tallying about \$110. These figures do not include any contingency to provide for medical or surgical emergencies or care for the animals during vacations.

The age of your new puppy or kitten is also important. A socialization period begins at about 3 weeks and ends around 12 weeks of age. A pet shows peak approach behavior between weeks 5 and 7. This is the best time to introduce your pet to all other animals and people it will associate with later. If the pet is placed with other animals during this age period, they will form a close bond.

At 8 weeks a puppy is first capable of learning by training. But between weeks 8 and 9, it is also extremely vulnerable to having its personality damaged by traumatic experiences.

## Breed and size considerations

Consider breed and size when giving a pet. To give a large dog to someone without ample room would be a terrible mistake. A dog with a vast store of energy, which is common in many intermediate breeds, needs enough room for

exercise. If the animal is to serve a specific purpose, consider this prior to obtaining it. Don't give a Pekinese as a hunting dog or a Chihuahua as an outside dog in subzero weather.

Consider the source of the pet. A safe generalization is that healthy animals can be obtained where pets have received good care. To avoid disappointment, get healthy puppies and kittens from known reliable sources where health history, including vaccinations, parasite problems and temperament of dam and sire, is known.

## Receiving the new pet

Prepare in advance for the arrival of your new dog or cat. Avoid obtaining or giving a pet during peak vacation periods or holidays. At these times, distractions prevent you from giving the pet proper attention.

When obtaining or giving a pet as a gift, avoid shipping during holidays, peak vacation periods or subzero weather. When shipping during very hot weather, ship either early in the morning or late in the evening for the animal's comfort.

When delivering a puppy or kitten, do not gift wrap, box or package the pet in any way that will endanger its life. This cruel practice has claimed the lives of many puppies and kittens.

When giving or getting a new puppy or kitten, make sure the new owners receive it in the morning. This will give the animal an entire day to get acquainted with its new surroundings and its new owners. The animal also should be provided a box with bedding where it can find comfort and uninterrupted rest.

Most people want to play with a new puppy or kitten. If it is healthy and rested, the animal also will want to play. But remember that young animals tire easily and need to rest and sleep. Don't play with them until they are completely worn out before allowing them to rest.

When handling a new puppy or kitten, do not pick it up by the front legs. Instead, place a hand under its abdomen, lift it into your arms and cradle it so that its body lies along your arm.

Find out from previous owners what the animal has been fed. If possible, start your new animal on the same diet. If you intend to change diets, make the change gradually. Many well-balanced, commercially prepared diets are available.

Find out to what degree a puppy has been housebroken or paper-trained and whether or not a kitten has been litter-trained. Don't be surprised if accidents occur during the first few days in new surroundings. The animal must have time to become familiar with its new environment before learning the proper area for elimination.

Try to give your animal a good, healthy start. Obtain the advice of a practicing veterinarian concerning vaccinations and other preventive medicine procedures as soon as possible.

## Owner responsibilities

Provide adequate shelter for your pet. This means planning for all contingencies. It is essential that shelter for the outdoor pet provide protection against hot as well as cold weather. Many animals are lost because of inadequate shade, insulation or ventilation.

Before obtaining a pet you should decide if you are going to breed the animal. It is an act of responsibility not to contribute to the large number of unwanted animals in this country. When animals are bred only to teach children the facts of life, the lesson provided may be quite different when it comes to disposing of the unwanted litter. Neutering an animal can increase its life span by eliminating reproductive disorders and diseases. Neutering reduces the animal's desire to roam, which decreases fighting and bite-related problems.

Respect and adhere to local ordinances governing animal control and licensure. Remember that animal control ordinances and officers are necessary because a large percentage of the pet-owning public does not practice owner responsibility. Instead, they allow their pets to become public nuisances and community health hazards.

Provide an adequate exercise area for your pet, such as a fenced yard. Dogs have been domesticated for nearly 10,000 years; they depend on man for shelter, food, protection and companionship. Given their preference, these animals would rather stay and exercise with their owners. The average life span of pets that are allowed to run free is only one to two years.

Provide care for your pet during your vacation. Unfortunately, many people leave their pets unattended with little food or water and subject to traumatic incidents while they are away from home.

Training can increase the pleasure you get from having a pet. Basic training for family living includes simple commands like "come," "sit" and "stay," which improve your pet's manners.

If your animal is aggressive, you should warn people that the animal may bite. You are responsible for properly restraining aggressive animals.

Cleaning up after your pets is your responsibility. Pets should not be allowed to eliminate wastes in public areas. Waste materials should be disposed of immediately as they may be a source of disease for other animals and humans.

Many good handbooks and pamphlets are available on basic care, housebreaking, etc. Contact your local kennel club, animal shelter or veterinarian; nearly all of these groups will have free literature available.

Owning a pet may be rewarding and pleasurable and can provide benefits that are important to a person's well-being. All of us who own pets are aware of this and have an obligation to encourage and enhance responsible pet ownership. If we fulfill our responsibilities, we will continue to have the freedom of pet ownership in this country.

## Related MU Extension publications

- G9910, Rabbits and Rodents as Pets  
<http://extension.missouri.edu/p/G9910>
- G9920, Feeding the Dog  
<http://extension.missouri.edu/p/G9920>
- NCR254, Your Cat and You  
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