

More than stocking stuffers

Holidays are a difficult time to adopt that cute puppy or kitten

By Valerie Kuklenski, Staff Writer

It's such a Hallmark card moment, the image of little ones in footed sleepers bounding toward the Christmas tree to greet the hoped-for puppy or kitten wearing the big red bow around its neck.

But pet experts say the holidays are the most difficult time of year to introduce a new animal to a household. They suggest adopting animals either well before or after the hustle and bustle of entertaining and other disruptions.

"This time of year, you have people who want a puppy, and you say, 'Are you sure? You just had the carpets cleaned, you're going to have 70 guests at a party and relatives coming in from out of town,'" said Madeline Bernstein, president of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Los Angeles.

Have a family discussion

Whether families are buying from a breeder, a pet store or are adopting a homeless animal, SpcaLA strongly discourages choosing a pet without an informed discussion involving everyone in the home. It's about finding the right pet for the family — and finding the right family for the pet.

SpcaLA, like many nonprofit organizations placing homeless pets, asks many questions of its applicants, such as the size of the home, ages of children, how many hours a day a pet would be left alone and allergy issues.

"Sometimes people come in thinking they want a golden retriever, and they leave with a hamster," Bernstein said.

Even other pets in the home may need to submit to an "interview." A family looking for a second dog may be asked to bring in the current pet for a meeting with the new dog in neutral territory.

And an adult dog may end up being the best choice for many reasons.

"People come in believing all the myths that puppies will love you more. And they come back in hysterics because the puppy ate the picnic table, ruined the drapes, had diarrhea," Bernstein said.

Judy Cullen of Woodland Hills had put some thought into it before bringing her boys to Petco on a recent Sunday to look at animals offered by Cats at the Studios, an organization known for rescuing feral kittens and neutering the grown cats that roam Hollywood film lots.

Cullen said she has had cats in the past and was looking for the first pets for her sons, Jack, 5, and Sean, 2.

Dog or cat?

"We're on the fence between dogs and cats," she said. "Dogs are more social, and we don't know if we'll be home enough. Cats are more independent. And (the boys) seem to be more at home with cats because all the in-laws have cats," she said.

While Cullen talked it over with her husband, the boys browsed the nearby aquariums. "Oooh, a scorpion," Jack said.

"No scorpion. Tarantulas are out," his mom replied.

More than an hour later, after having their application approved and committing to keep their appointments for spaying and neutering, the Cullens were on their way with a cartload of supplies and an unrelated pair of kittens — a lynx-point Siamese named Roxie and a dusty gray male who answers to Stone.

Most nonprofit animal shelters and rescues will take back a pet that turns out to be the wrong one for a household, but the thorough adoption process is aimed at making a lifelong match.

"We do see the trend that, around Thanksgiving time and just before Christmas, people will turn their older senior dogs in to shelters, and then they buy a puppy for Christmas," said Lisa James, founder of Winnetka-based Life4Paws. "Then, about February into summer, you'll find those dogs being discarded because they're not so cute anymore."

Home visit

The application process gives some insight about prospective adopters, but the organizations say they learn more from talking with the owners-to-be and from home visits. "We might see some of the dangers you don't see living there every day," said James.

Bernstein says adoption screeners also will look for signs that point to a temperament mismatch, such as a high-strung dog being placed in a home where the teenager rehearses with his garage band.

Pet adoption agencies aren't saying that no one should take home an animal in November and December. But they do suggest giving it serious thought.

For the child who pleads with Santa Claus for a dog or cat, Bernstein suggests that Santa leave a book about caring for that kind of pet under the tree, and then involve the child in choosing the animal at a later date.

Here are some organizations that place homeless pets and sites with information to guide your decision:

- SpcaLA, (323) 730-5300, spcala.com. Topanga Pet Adoption Center, Westfield Promenade, 6100 Topanga Canyon Blvd., Woodland Hills, (818) 932-7988.
- Life4Paws, caring mainly for dogs, (818) 772-4335, life4paws.org.
- Petfinder.com, a searchable guide to adoptable animals and a good resource for all your questions.
- The Humane Society of the United States, hsus.org.
- Cats at the Studios Inc. (CATS), (818) 341-8936, www.catsatthestudios.org.

Matching pets and kids

When asked whether they will help care for a pet, every young child will say yes, but few can or will actually do it.

Charlotte Reznick, former UCLA Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology, suggests first making sure a child is in the habit of completing other chores by keeping a chart.

Younger children may benefit from pretending to feed a pet on a regular basis before the pet arrives.

And kids of all ages should be trained in how to work with and tend a pet, not expected to do it properly without instruction.

Here are some guidelines from the **American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals** on animal care expectations by age:

Ages 3-5: A guinea pig enjoys being held, and a child can help with filling the food dish or the water bottle.

Ages 5-10: A child can do at least some care for shelf pets such as mice, rats and fish.

Ages 10-13: A child is ready for much of the responsibility involved in caring for a dog or cat, including regular walks, active play, feeding and cleaning up the litter box or the back yard.

Ages 14-17: A child can handle animal responsibilities, but may have little spare time for those chores because of schoolwork, activities and a social life.

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