

Animals As Gifts

When you read this it will be December already. Time is flying and if you have not completed your gift shopping, I have some ideas and suggestions that may help make it easier.

First off, please, do not give animals as gifts. With few exceptions it is not a good idea to give an animal companion as a gift. Sharing your life with an animal friend is a gift in itself but it is also a tremendous obligation and commitment. It needs to be a choice made consciously by the person who will be responsible for that animal.

This commitment should never be entered into lightly. It is a lifetime commitment to the animal and depending on the type of animal, fish, reptile, rabbit, cat, dog or bird, to name a few, that lifetime may be longer than the human caretaker's.

Over the years, as an animal behavior therapist, I have been hired by many clients to help them solve problems they are having with an animal that was given to them by a well meaning, usually relative. The details may be different but the story is always the same. "We didn't want this dog. Our kids thought we needed a dog to keep us company or active or whatever."

In the majority of these cases, I have found that the animal involved was not particularly suited to the people or person it was given to. For example, I have had several cases of adult children giving puppies to older parents. Many older folks simply do not have the energy or physical abilities anymore to do what is required to educate and train the pup. It is too much for them. In some of these situations, an animal companion might have been a good idea but an older model or different type or breed would have



Our Animal Friends

by Martha Norwalk



been a better choice.

What is extra appalling to me in these situations is that most of these people reported telling their children that they did not want an animal companion but the kids did not listen. They got the animal for their parents anyway!

Unfortunately, the parents end up going along with it because they think they have to or the gifters simply will not accept no and insist that they try. After months or even years of unpleasant circumstances, I am called in to fix it.

Sometimes I have been able to do that and in other cases we have decided to re-home the animal to a

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more suitable environment. This has been traumatic for all parties involved and could have been avoided.

If you think the gift of an animal friend is a good idea for someone, please talk with them about it. Only if they agree should you proceed in the process. Please listen to someone who says they do not want an animal and accept it.

In most cases, I think it is best for the new pet owner to be involved in picking the individual animal that they will be responsible for. If you want it to be a surprise, give them a gift basket with a leash, collar and toys with a gift certificate. As far as I know, all local shelters and rescues will provide a gift certificate so the selection can be made, by the new owner, after the holidays are over.

On general principles it is not a wise idea to bring a new animal friend into the household during the holidays as it can be a busy and stressful time for many.

Please do not buy a gift certificate from a pet store for a dog or cat unless they are from a local shelter on loan.

Otherwise, these animals are likely from a puppy mill type operation. I know it can feel good to save an individual puppy from a pet store but I prefer to honor the bigger picture here. Every time someone buys one of these pups, another one will take its place and this keeps the saga going. We must cut off the market in order to shut down the puppy mill operations all over the country.

It is important to note here that if you purchase a puppy at these stores, you will pay more for an inferior individual. Many have serious behavioral and physical problems because of irresponsible breeding and raising. If you want a purebred pup, go to a responsible private, local breeder so you can meet the parents and see where they have been born and raised. Do not trust the Internet.

Unfortunately, we have several of these "puppy stores" in our area and they are all over the country. All of their pups come from puppy mills and if you cannot resist the temptation, stay away from the stores.

Another fabulous gift idea for animal lovers on your list is to make a donation to an animal rescue, shelter or sanctuary in their name. You can pick an organization that serves the type of animal that your friend is most fond of.

Continued on page 11

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