

## PETS IN THE FAMILY

By Kathy Griffiths

One morning recently, as I was getting ready for work, I heard my 8-year-old daughter singing happily in her room. It was her own just-made-up song---spontaneous, of and for the moment. It was a song about friendship, about a very special friend---our dog, a playful black-and-white Australian Shepherd.

Pets can be a wonderful addition to a family! We have several (more than most people might want at one time). We have three cats---one, old and wise (she has always been wise), who loves to engage you in conversation; one, a big cuddly long-haired ball of white fluff, like a ragdoll, with a heart of gold; and the third, a shy, female, feral cat who hides and lives very happily in our front yard. We have two big dogs---the friendly Aussie who loves to play and *loves to bark*, and an even bigger German Shepard-mix (part trouble maker for sure) who loves to steal socks and eat paper! The two dogs are devoted companions to one another.

While pets can be wonderful, they are also a real commitment and responsibility. Getting a pet is a decision worthy of a lot of thought and planning. Puppies and kittens can be so irresistibly appealing, you may find yourself going home with one that you're not really ready for! And especially with dogs, the *breed*, *temperament*, and *size* can make a huge difference in how well they will fit into your lifestyle!

When we adopted our older dog (the Shepherd-mix), we had not really defined the qualities and temperament we wanted. After answering several ads in the Sacramento paper and being tired of driving around, we ended up coming home with a puppy that turned out to be a real challenge for us in many ways. We made it through a difficult puppyhood---and things have since gotten easier---but the stress level was higher than we were prepared for! With our second dog, we planned much better and had the Aussie breed specifically in mind for many wonderful qualities we had observed. Still, we didn't know as much as we could have about the breed,



and have come to find out that some Aussies are real barkers (and ours is one of those)!

The responsibilities go on, of course, for the life of the pet. This is another important factor to consider. Veterinary bills can get expensive, even with healthy animals and just basic routine care. And unexpected mishaps---whether accidents, illness, fights with other animals---can push veterinary expenses way, way up! (We've been in veterinary offices more than we've been in doctors' offices!) Cats and dogs get a series of shots when they are young and yearly/alternate yearly boosters thereafter. All of our animals have been neutered or spayed, another expense. Our big dog suffered something we called "growing pains" in her legs when she was young, resulting in appointment and X-ray costs. A male cat next door likes to challenge our fluffy male cat in our own front yard, resulting occasionally in a bite wound/abscess requiring antibiotic treatment. We have had our share of assorted mishaps and injuries over the years! Quite honestly, the bills for the dogs have added up to a lot more than the bills for the cats. This is another factor to consider when deciding what type of pet you may want, and what would be practical for your family.

Then there are other issues such as grooming, bathing, exercising, and flea control! These can all add up to more expense, as well as time and effort. Will the kids play with the dog every day? Some dogs really need to go for a walk or a run every day. Is this a commitment you are willing to make? And if house-training a puppy or putting up with a kitten's energy is something you really don't want to go through, you might be happier adopting a full-grown dog or cat.

Other drawbacks and considerations to think about include *dog hair*. Some breeds are worse than others for shedding---it collects on the floor and gets everywhere! (So can cat hair which is often found on chairs and sticks to your clothes!) Every winter we have the challenge of muddy paws tracking dirt on the floor on rainy days. There's also the matter of clean-up detail in the yard with dogs and dealing with litter boxes if you have indoor cats. Weekends away or vacations may require kenneling or in-home pet-care arrangements.

For some families, cats and dogs simply may not be practical. Other smaller types of pets may be more suitable. A bird, hamster, rabbit, or something else, may fit your lifestyle better. Even so, remember to think about how often you go away for weekends or vacations, and who will care for your pets while you are away. Rabbits are sensitive to hot weather, and may require ice in an outside hutch to stay cool on those very hot summer days.

Whatever type of pet you get, there is the matter of food---both the responsibility for feeding on a daily basis, and the cost factor of whatever type of pet food you buy. After our oldest cat suffered from "FUS" (Feline Urologic Syndrome) several years ago, we had to start buying top-quality cat food. And we have to feed it to all three of our cats, as they eat together outside, and we find it impossible to keep their food separate!

Pet ownership can be difficult at times, but for our family the benefits have outweighed the drawbacks. In spite of all the challenges and inconveniences, pets can extend a family in a warm and wonderful way! Pets provide an opportunity for kids to learn responsibility and commitment, on a daily, on-going basis.

As mentioned, getting a pet is a decision worthy of a lot of thought and planning. Consider what kind of pet would fit in harmoniously with your family, in your home, in your yard. Think about who will take responsibility for care and feeding. Recognize that costs for petfood and veterinary care may add up to more than expected. Think about the commitments for exercise, grooming, and how you'll cover the times you and your family go on trips or vacations. Define what's right for you. Have a plan. Then go look at those irresistible puppies and kitten (or full-grown dogs and cats), rabbits, hamster, birds, *or whatever*, and open your heart!

---

*Kathy Griffiths lives in Davis with her husband and daughter and a houseful of pets.*

