

On the Positive Side: Once you select dog or cat, it's time to commit

By Bill Smith

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In last week's piece, criteria for selecting a companion animal, whether a dog or cat, puppy or kitten, were discussed. Now, after selection comes commitment to that new companion. "Every day in communities across the country, a bond is broken. It's the bond between people and their pets, resulting in millions of confused, frightened pets being relinquished," says Pauline Larsen, Paw Prints, TLC Canine Center, Newell, Iowa.

"Instant gratification in our impulsive, disposable society often comes in the form of a cuddly puppy (or kitten), with reluctant parents who are totally unprepared for the responsibility of pet parenting, being talked into a dog by the promise that the kids will take care of the animal. When the novelty passes, the realization that dogs require a great deal of time and effort hits! Not being committed to long-term care of an animal, and not understanding that they might need to make some life style adjustments when they brought a dog into their home, the inclination may be to abdicate responsibility.

"Dogs are living, breathing, feeling creatures who need to be part of a pack, Larsen says. "They form deep attachments to the people they care for, and don't understand if they are taken away from their home. They miss their families and they suffer genuine emotional pain at being abandoned."

Most people, Larsen says, will go the extra mile for their animals, and understand that unacceptable behaviors can be corrected, or at least modified, to help the pet become a more enjoyable member of the household. "Others may simply lack the commitment that goes with pet care. Some people trade in their refrigerators or cars; others trade in their dogs." Most problems, she says, can be corrected with patience and persistence:

- Exercise is the solution to most bad habits. A tired dog is usually a good dog!
- Chewing and destructive behavior can be controlled by providing diversions. A bored dog is destined to find trouble! Every dog needs a Buster Cube and a Kong or two if it is to fend for itself for extended periods.
- House rules need to be set and enforced by everyone. Consistency will result in a well-behaved pet. Remember, good dogs are the result of training by good caregivers!
- Obedience classes are encouraged, with the involvement of the entire family.

Although Larsen's focus is on dogs, her comments apply equally to any companion animal you take into your home. The level of commitment one owes to any pet are summed up well in these reminders from Larsen:

- I am meant to be a forever dog, not an "until" dog
- I am not an "until you get bored with me" dog
- I'm not an "until you have a baby" dog, or an "until you have to move" dog.
- I am not an "until you have no time" dog, or an "until I get old" dog.
- I am meant to be a forever dog.

Bill Smith is a Help Line volunteer with the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico. Interested guest authors can contact HSSNM at (575) 523-8020.