

Could Be the Perfect Gift- For Yourself or Someone Else

Easy Quiz: Name your favorite gift you received last year for the holidays.

Harder Quiz: Name your favorite gift you received in 1987.

How did you do? My answers: last year, poster autographed by members of the 2004 US Olympic team. 1987: my first dog, a Bassett puppy that stole my heart before I even held her. Now, don't get me wrong, I REALLY like the poster, but I think you can understand the difference.

If You Are Thinking About a New Pet

My first advice is to be careful with this decision. This is a lifetime commitment to this pet. Impulse decisions are very dangerous. Cuteness is everywhere and can cloud clear thinking! I think that this decision is even more difficult when selecting a pet as a gift, because as the giver, you have to be very knowledgeable about the desires and lifestyle of the recipient. Remember if a sweater is not the right size or style a trip to mall will correct the misjudgment, but with pets you are making a life choice. The right pet is the most thoughtful gift, but the worst sweater is much better than the wrong pet.

Before you even decide to look for a pet, think carefully about how the pet will fit into its lifestyle. Are you looking for a cuddle companion, an athletic playmate or both? Think about travel: weekends spent in mountains with you or at home alone? Think about the time available to spend with the pet. If the schedule is too tight to house train, is a puppy the right choice? Is the household set-up to receive the pet? Is there enough space for a Labrador or a goldfish? If this is a gift for a young person, they will need family support to care for the new addition. The responsibility for a pet is emotional, physical and financial.

The best money ever spent with a veterinarian may be for a consultation before you select a pet. They can provide valuable information regarding type of pets and breeds, expected activities, and common health problems. These consultations are especially valuable to people looking for more unusual pets (such as reptiles and "pocket pets") that may have special needs for nutrition and housing.

Is This The One?

Peeking over the edge of a baby gate at the puppies or through the bars of the cat's cage...I don't know if it is love at first sight exactly, but it is love the first time you point and whisper "that one." As a pet owner, I love that feeling. As a veterinarian, I worry about that feeling because it has caused people to pick the wrong pet for them. When looking to find my next love, I found my heeler Teva on the second trip to the third place. It was hard to walk out and not take a pet with me every trip, but I needed to find her as much as she needed to find me. She was worth the effort.

Before you let yourself think "that one," slow down long enough to check out the environment and the pet itself. Is the environment clean and appropriate? Are all the other animals cared for properly? Does the pet you are considering appear healthy and active? If these questions aren't a strong "yes," be cautious. These things may be indications of future trou-

ble. It is hard to leave an animal if you don't think the conditions are good, but you need to be prepared for worries.

Short of having a veterinarian with you, there are several things that any prospective owner can look for in a pet. If you are looking at a litter of pups or kittens, they should all look healthy and be about the same size. Ask if there has been any illness in the litter.

Dogs and cats, both young and old, can be susceptible to upper respiratory tract infections. Nasal discharge, coughing, sneezing, and eye discharge can all be signs of upper respiratory infections. Most cases will resolve with minimal medical care, but others will develop into pneumonia or may suggest underlying conditions such as immune compromise or viral infections. Some of these infections may also spread to your other animals.

Vomiting, diarrhea, and poor appetite are warnings also, especially for puppies. These signs may be associated with simple things such as worms or diet changes, but they also can represent serious viral infections such as Parvo virus. If you are selecting a young puppy or kitten, be careful to understand that it is not protected by its vaccinations until it has completed the full series (usually completed at 4 months old). Request a vaccination record, but know that *any vaccinations given before about 8 weeks of age are generally not effective* as they are blocked by the antibodies provided in the mother's milk. Puppies that have not completed their vaccinations should not be out and about- no shopping, no dog parks, no neighborhoods, no obedience school, because they are still at risk for infection.

While you are petting and meeting the animal, look at their teeth, eyes, hair coat and skin. How are the ears? Red, irritated, thickened ears might indicate chronic ear infections and skin allergies. Yellow urine staining to the hairs of the hind legs is a strong sign of incontinence in female dogs.

Any concerns about the health of the prospective pet are significant. *No matter what is promised there can be*



no guarantees for a pet's health. This is very important to understand from the start. Most pet stores and many breeders will offer some sort of guarantee, but it is a financial guarantee. If a pet becomes very sick or has a congenital defect, you may be able to return the pet for "store credit" or a refund. This is a heartbreaker because I have never met a person who felt fulfillment from this arrangement. "The one" you chose is no longer with you. Some now offer a short version of insurance or discounted veterinary care initially, but again this is financial and ultimately the care is your responsibility. I advise you to look for health problems before you commit in your heart, because being prepared to walk away without a new pet or being prepared for health concerns is your choice. If you have to walk away, you will find the right pet somewhere else, I have faith.

Owning a pet is one of the most powerful ways to enrich our lives, and pet owners know this. As much as Callie, Waylon, and Teva are my pets, I am their person; they need me as I need them. I wish you luck and love in your search for *the one perfect gift* (even if you keep it for yourself).

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