

## Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

**Dear Kathleen,**

**Next month, our daughter – Kendra -- is turning eleven and has asked for only one birthday present – a dog. She’s a good kid with excellent grades and very responsible for her age. Kendra loves animals but my wife has always resisted any kind of pet in our home even though our daughter has begged for one for more than four years now. My wife says they are “too much trouble.” Still, she agreed to keep an open mind and read your response to our dilemma. -- Carl**

Dear Carl,

I’m afraid your wife is “barking” up the wrong tree if she believes that I would deny any responsible child the joy of having a pet. In fact, I shared your question with my beautiful 13-year-old yellow Labrador Retriever – Dorothy – and she asked me to make the following points. “Let the lobbying begin!” is actually the way she put it.

Whether they hop, swim, fly, slither or pad around on four furry feet, pets are good for kids. Research has shown – and shown quite convincingly – that children learn many subtleties of communication through loving relationships with their pets. They learn to take care of someone other than themselves, and, thus, build a firm foundation in developing empathy and nurturing skills.

Kids with animal companions tend to have higher levels of resiliency and self-confidence than those without them. An animal’s expression of unconditional love, and their uncanny grace at refraining from negative judgments are a refreshing departure from our often overly critical world filled with constant evaluation about grades, athletic ability, physical attractiveness, and behavior. Perhaps this is what led writer George Eliot to gush, “Animals are such agreeable friends - they ask no questions, they pass no criticisms.” True enough.

Several studies demonstrated that dogs have powerful and positive effects on pre-teens. Self-esteem, sensitivity toward others, and self-care were statistically significantly higher among kids who owned dogs. (Dorothy doesn’t like that word “owned”...she says that if anything, she owns me).

Pets teach kids responsibility, independence, and self-discipline – all skills that set them on a superior path to becoming mature adults. The mere presence of Spot, Fluffy, or Mr. Whiskers in your home will reduce everyone’s blood pressure and attenuate stress. Collectively caring for a pet can bring children and parents closer together

Sit down as a family and let everyone talk about their feelings and preferences. Your wife has a right to insist that Kendra take the lion’s share (Lions, by the way, do not make good pets) of responsibility for feeding, walking, brushing, and caring for this new four-legged family member. An eleven-year-old should have no trouble with these duties.

If – as a family – you all agree that Kendra can have a dog, then begin to do your homework. When selecting a pet, it’s important to keep your family’s lifestyle in mind. Don’t make an impulsive decision. Instead, learn about characteristics of different breeds. Even mixed breeds will have temperaments of their breed genes. Don’t go to the

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animal shelter like a blank slate. Instead, have a particular kind of dog in mind (after you've done your research). Look for "something like a Lab" or "something like a Jack Russell Terrier." Do you want a puppy or a mature dog, a purebred or mixed breed?

Look at your home situation. Are there younger children in your family who will be inclined to pinch, pull at, or ride around on Kendra's new pal? Consider the kind of dwelling you live in. A 135-pound St. Bernard is better suited to a large house with a yard rather than a two-bedroom condo in the city. Talk with people at the ASPCA or a local veterinarian for opinions about breeds that would best suit your family. There are numerous books and other resources that can help your family make a good pet choice.

If we get a vote in your family decision, please put Dorothy and me in the "Yea" column.

Send your personal coaching questions to [kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com](mailto:kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com) or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at [www.fullpotentialliving.com](http://www.fullpotentialliving.com).