

Pets « One of the family

As well as the cute factor and companionship, pets offer great health benefits, both mental and physical. But, just like every family, every animal is different.

So, how do you choose the right one?

Look beyond looks!

You may like the look of a particular pet but that doesn't mean they're right for you. Many assume smaller pets are great for children but this isn't always the case. Some (e.g. hamsters and chinchillas) are nocturnal which means that when the kids want to play, they might not appreciate being disturbed or even get 'nippy'. Pets such as gerbils and mice are



quick and agile so it's difficult for children to handle them without squeezing too hard (ouch!). As for rabbits, they're prey animals and don't always enjoy being picked up and cuddled (n.b. make sure to invest in a foxproof home, or you could be left with some very tearful youngsters...)

Top of the pups

Dogs have evolved to become acutely attuned to humans, our behaviour and emotions. "I do think you're either a dog person or you're not," says Helen Pink, 45, of Dunsfold, who now works as a pet-sitter and carer, having switched career after 26 years travelling the world as a sales support executive for Kuoni. "The love you get from a dog is unconditional and they're the ultimate stress-reliever! However, dogs are a huge commitment and, because they're so sensitive, require a lot of care, so make sure you choose carefully. I have a Collie called Arthur and the breed is very energetic. I would say, though, that smaller dogs can be the perfect fit and need less walking."

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Lifestyles

Certain dog breeds have strong traits – for example Jack Russell terriers can need a lot of play to stop boredom and shih tzus require lots of grooming. If you have children, look for a friendly, confident dog rather than a particular breed. Also withhold your prejudice; less popular pets such as rats can make great pets and love social interaction.

Plan ahead

Want a cat? Will they have access to outside space while you're out? How would you feel coming home to a clawed sofa? That gorgeous pet gazing longingly at you could live anything from two to 20 years (or more; Churchill's parrot, Surrey resident Charlie, is allegedly 116 years old). Tot up costs for insurance, food and toys and vet's bills.

To the rescue!

Thousands of stray, abandoned and unwanted pets need homes. Charities such as Blue Cross and Cats Protection League offer plenty advice. Adult rescue pets are a great choice because their personalities are established. They will be neutered, microchipped and vaccinated. If you are set on a breed of dog but still want a rescue pet, contact specialist rescue organisations via The Kennel Club.

Pedigree chums

If you do want a pedigree pal, ask your vet or breed club

to recommend a responsible breeder. Ask to meet the pet's relatives to observe their temperament and welfare. Ask about how the youngsters have been socialised. You can ask to contact the breeder's vet and other people who've bought from them – if they refuse, go elsewhere.

Paws for thought!

Love animals but a pet is too much of a commitment? You can get some puppy (or similar) love. BorrowMy Doggy (www.borrowmydoggy.com) can match you up with local hounds for walkies and cuddles or how about caring for a Guide Dog puppy? You can enjoy all the fun, (without the toilet training) sending them off to change a life.



Visit www.guide dogs.org.uk



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