



Acting Your SMARTS

Advice for the Caregiver

I think Dad
loves the dog
more than me

by Kari Berit

There are numerous good reasons not to have an animal as one ages, or so I've been told. I don't buy it. Whether it be a dog, a cat, a bird, a fish or any other pet, when I hear older adults trying to convince themselves that they don't want or can't have another animal—they live in a condo that doesn't allow pets, or they travel too much to be bothered, or they simply don't want the responsibility, or they don't think they can deal with the prospect of yet another loss—I can't help asking: Why not?

I understand. Pets need attention. Every day. Whether it's cleaning out their litter boxes, or taking them on walks, or filling their food and water bowls, or just making time for them—typically on their schedule, not yours—pets rely on their owners for their daily needs. To me, that's a good thing.

And it might be equally good for your parents. Their home is empty. Their kids are

grown, moved out and wrapped up in their own lives. Their friends are becoming fewer or less accessible. Why rule out having someone in their lives who needs them, responds to them, entertains them, makes demands on them—and loves them unconditionally?

You can just as easily take the reasons not to have a pet and turn them into the very reasons your parents may want—and even need—to have one. Loneliness, isolation, inactivity, obesity, depression, grieving—each, in its own way, can be partially, if not fully, alleviated by having a pet.

Kelly Connolly, issues specialist with the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), made the case this way in the December, 2005, issue of *Minnesota Monthly* magazine:

Emotionally, pets can bring new meaning and purpose to the life of a senior who is living far away from friends or family. The love

and commitment to their owners is almost like free therapy. They can act as friends, entertainers and warm, fuzzy bundles of joy. Having a pet in an elderly person's life can offer them a sense of wellbeing, a sense of encouragement and even a reason for living. Being responsible for another life often gives new meaning to the lives of those who are living alone or far from loved ones. Caring for and providing a loving home to a companion animal also helps elderly people to remain active and stay healthy.

HSUS has a program to help bring animals together with seniors. Many local animal shelters also offer senior programs. Shelters have a number of advantages over pet stores. For starters, the shelter is more likely to have a staff that can advise and guide the potential new pet owner. Adopting from a shelter is also more cost-effective; adoption fees are extremely low compared with the cost of purchasing an animal from a pet store or breeder.

Planning for pets

Of course, if your parents do have a pet, it needs to be included in any plans you're helping them make. If I ever became ill or unable to express my wishes, I would want professional staff and family alike to know that having Eli, our current dog, near me would be essential in my recovery. Do your parents feel this way about their pets? When they can no longer care for them, what do they want done? If you don't know, ask. Then write it down and put it in their "important documents" folder. Then make copies for everybody.

Similarly, if they have to move from a home where they have a pet to one where they can't keep one, what are their wishes? Having to give up a pet at any age can be devastating. In your parents' later years, it can be especially tough. If they can't move with their current pet, help them make connections with visiting pets.

Animals and babies...They have the uncanny ability to spread unconditional love. And yeah, sometimes it's easier for your parents to love the cat more than you. Or so it seems.

Kari Berit (www.KariBerit.com) is the author of The Unexpected Caregiver: How Boomers Can Keep Mom & Dad Active, Safe and Independent (2007: Attainment Company). She helps seniors and their adult children create effective dialogue around things that matter.