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Think twice before giving a child a pet for Christmas

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It's a moment right out of a Norman Rockwell painting; the kids in their pajamas under the tree, opening a box containing a cute puppy or kitten with a bright red bow on its collar. But surprising someone, especially a child, with a pet may not be the best gift idea.

"When you surprise a child with a pet, you miss out on a teachable moment for the child to be involved in the decision," said Carolyn Paden of the Asheville Humane Society.

"It's a good opportunity to teach them what's involved in caring for a pet."

You should carefully consider whether a pet fits in with your family's lifestyle. "It's not like a board game you can take back to Target," Paden said.

Before you make a decision on giving a pet, here are a few dos and don'ts to consider in making sure you choose the pet that's the best fit for your family:

Do:

- Think twice. Has the person you're giving the pet to expressed a desire for one? Just because you think grandma would like a pet doesn't mean she really wants one.
- Look ahead to this time next year. Is that puppy going to grow into a dog that's bigger than you have space for?
- Remember that there is no such thing as a free pet. According to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, a small dog will cost its owner \$810 in care, feeding and vet bills the first year alone. A medium dog will drain \$1,190 from the budget, and a large dog will eat up \$1,580 in expenses.

That free kitten will end up costing you \$715, and even a Guinea pig will cost \$645 to feed and keep healthy.

- Talk with people who own or breed the type of pet you are considering.

Don't:

- Make a snap decision. Carefully research the breed of dog or cat to make sure it's appropriate for your family.

- Rush home with your new pet and invite the entire neighborhood to see it; allow it a chance to settle in.
- Hold and play with your new pet too much the first couple of days.
- Put a real pet under the tree. A good alternative for a puppy under the tree may be a stuffed dog wearing the collar for a new puppy with a card that says, "Good for one puppy from the animal shelter." That way the entire family can help choose the right pet after the holidays.

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