

Are Pets OK as Gifts? Sure, With Common Sense

By Mark Robison

With the holidays coming up, some animal groups will be promoting pets as great gifts while other places will say this should never be done. These contradictory messages can be confusing.

The truth, as is often the case, lies somewhere in the middle. I faced this situation in my own life.

I was a firm believer that pets should never be given as a gift, and anyone who would do so was being thoughtless to the receiver and thoughtless to the animal, who should only ever be chosen by the person getting the pet.

But when I moved to Reno from Kansas, I left my cat Oliver with my ailing mother, who received much comfort from the orphaned black and white tom cat found in a dumpster behind a newspaper office. Soon after my mother died and the cat stayed with my father, my girlfriend (and now wife) gave me a little black kitten, hoping he would make me feel better. I named him Boo (after Boo Radley), and he did lessen my grief. He was one of the best gifts I received.

If my then-girlfriend had gone to a shelter and told them of her plans to give me a cat, many would have turned her away. One reason some shelters don't adopt out animals who would be gifts is that they fear people will simply return them like an extra toaster. But in [a 1999 study published in the Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science](#), researchers interviewed people relinquishing pets at 12 different shelters in four regions of the country – and “unwanted pet” accounted for only 0.3% of them.

Another reason given against the idea of pets-as-gifts is the belief that the animals might seem more disposable. That is unfounded, too. In [a study from 2013](#), researchers from the ASPCA reached more than 1,000 random adults in the United States and examined further the 222 who said they'd received a pet as a gift. They found that pets received as gifts were not any less loved and that their people didn't feel any less attachment for them than pets they'd picked out themselves. This was certainly the case with Boo and me.

The ASPCA researchers also found that “receiving a dog or cat as a gift was not associated with ... whether the dog or cat was still in the home. These results suggest there is no increased risk of relinquishment for dogs and cats received as a gift.”

All of this is not to say you should be handing out pets to people you only sort of know – no one should be tempted to give a Chihuahua to a co-worker as a secret Santa gift during the office Christmas party. Common sense should prevail.

Think of the abilities and wants of the recipient. Your frail grandparent may be terrified by the thought of a rambunctious Labrador – but an older cat or dog who prefers long naps may be truly cherished.

If in doubt and you think someone you know well would appreciate a cat, dog or rabbit, the main shelters in Northern Nevada offer adoption gift certificates that allow the recipient to come in and pick out a pet who suits them.

In short, it's just fine if a cat or a dog is part of your thoughtful gift-giving during the upcoming holidays. After all, being homeless and then adopted into a new, loving home fits with the spirit of the season better than just about any other gift.

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