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NICOLE VILLALPANDO RAISING AUSTIN

## A new puppy for Christmas? Don't rush and know what's right for your family

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BY [NICOLE VILLALPANDO](#) - AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

The kittens looked so cute. Brother and sister Bengal mix kittens named Jack and Jill sat on a cat tree at the front of a local pet store. Soon we were holding both of them. Then Jack fell asleep on me, and Jill on my daughter, Ava. We had to get one, but we learned we couldn't get Jill without getting Jack, so we went from a no-cat family to a two-cat family.

We justified a lot that day. Ava's sixth birthday was coming up. We had a geriatric dog, maybe the cats would keep the dog company. They were really cute.



NICOLE VILLALPANDO

Who could resist this face? Ava Villalpando begged for a kitten when she was turning 6 and she got Jill, plus ... [Read More](#)

After four years of life with Jack and Jill, I wouldn't trade them in. We love them, but cats are not the best fit for our family.

We should have done our research. We should have thought beyond the cute kitten in the window to the practical: Who's going to take care of the litter box every day? If there's litter and balls of hair all over our house, are we willing to clean more often? If we have friends and family who are allergic, are we OK with them not being able to stay at our

house or even come for a short visit? And could we really afford the geriatric dog plus two kittens, who ended up with \$3,000 worth of vet bills that year?

This is the time of year when families might be considering a new pet for Christmas. Maybe you have visions of a yellow Labrador puppy with a red bow under the Christmas tree — just like in a movie.



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FIREHOUSE ANIMAL HEALTH CENTER

Dr. John Faught of Firehouse Animal Health Center recommends you know what you want in a pet before you get one.

“I don’t think it’s a bad idea,” says Dr. John Faught of Firehouse Animal Health Center. “It just needs to be thought out. ... It’s not like a new PlayStation that you’re not using a year from now. It’s going to be a dog that’s with you for 10-20 years.”

Pick the pet that’s right for your family.

Do you want to ease into pethood with a self-contained pet like a goldfish, a hermit crab, a hamster or a gerbil?



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FIDELIO DOG WORKS

Steve Haynes owns Fidelio Dog Works and helps families pick the right dog for them. The goldfish is not a pet you can play with, but you can hold a rodent or a hermit crab or lizard. Just know these probably aren't pets that are going to play fetch. Kids might lose interest.

Faught warns not to make a snap decision on cute pocket pets. You might be in for more work and effort than you thought. These pets require keeping the cage cleaned and regular feeding. Sometimes they require grooming or cleaning.

Depending on your children's ages, you can have them sign a pledge outlining the jobs they will need to complete and how often and what the consequences or rewards will be. Also, that cage cleaning and pet feeding will likely fall on you, no matter what promises are made.

Caged pets also have a short lifespan, which can be good because, if kids lose interest, your commitment is only a few years. But be prepared for a funeral and the tears that come with it.

If your family is looking at a cat, realize you're making a 15- to 20-year commitment. Like a dog, different breeds have different personality traits, and you want to match the breed to your family. Some cats are fiercely independent and don't want to be messed with. Others like to play and are very engaging.

"If you have a young child and a cat that doesn't want to come out and play with him, if the cat gets backed into a corner, the kid can get bit or scratched," Faught says.

Also, there's a myth that a kitten doesn't really require extra work. Although kittens are nothing like puppies, they still need socialization and litter-box training. You have to teach them how to be a cat and set guidelines about household rules. (Are kitchen counters a playground or off-limits?)

A dog is great for families who want a pet that needs interaction and who want to be able to take the pet on their adventures. When it comes to a dog, you really need to know who you are as a family. "Look at your family and how active your family is and how much time you have to deal with your pet," says Steve Haynes, a dog trainer who owns Fidelio Dog Works.

He has seen clients be really unrealistic. They'll choose a working breed or a hunting breed when they don't have time to exercise the dog or to give it jobs to do to avoid behavior problems.

If you are thinking of a puppy, realize that a puppy is like having a baby. "Potty training a puppy and a 2-year-old at the same time, that's hard," Haynes says.

Puppies take six months of training work minimum, and you want to train them early. Between ages 6 weeks and 16 weeks is the time to imprint on a puppy. Most puppies come to families at 8 or 9 weeks old, so you have to start working with them right away to have well-behaved adults.

If you're looking for a rescue dog, Haynes and Faught both suggest going through a reputable group that pulls dogs out of animal shelters and fosters them. It will know the dog better and can help you pick one that fits you. And, if for some reason it doesn't work out, a rescue group will happily take the dog back.

With a new dog or puppy, kids need to be taught not to ride them or pick them up by their front legs. They shouldn't tease the dog with food or put their face in the dog's face or pick up the dog as if it were a stuffed animal. Starting at age 6, kids can help train dogs by teaching them their names. Children can feed, play and walk them, with adult supervision, to teach the dog that good things come from kids.

If the dog is already there and you're bringing a baby into his or her world, start preparing a few months before the birth by walking the dog with an empty stroller, getting the dog on a schedule that you can keep once the baby comes and teaching dogs a "bed" or "place" command that will send the dog to his or her comfort zone in the house. This is especially helpful when the baby first comes home and you need to nurse or put the baby in the crib. Later on, it can be used as the baby starts to crawl or walk or eat from a highchair.