

A dog is for life, not just for Christmas

It is believed that over a third of UK households now have a pet dog, and a Dogs Trust study found that dogs are not only considered as companion animals or pets but are also often perceived as family members who 'complete' the home and with whom owners form emotional bonds.

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Rebecca Saunders, Senior PR Manager at Dogs Trust

Over 40 years ago, Dogs Trust, or The National Canine Defence League as it was known then, coined the phrase 'a dog is for life, not just for Christmas'. This was in response to the boom in pet shops and people making impulse purchases of puppies to give to family and friends as Christmas presents, resulting in a large number of animals being abandoned in the New Year.

Today, Dogs Trust thankfully no longer sees a spike in dogs being relinquished in January caused by unwanted Christmas presents. However, the charity is experiencing one of its busiest periods in its 130 year history. Last year, Dogs Trust received a record-breaking, and heartbreaking, 50 000 handover enquiries from owners struggling to care for their dogs. Thankfully, this record is unlikely to be surpassed in 2023, but demand on its services is still at incredibly high levels and this is echoed around the animal welfare sector.

As the Christmas period approaches, dog lovers may be tempted to add a puppy to the family and join the growing population of dog owners in the UK. As the UK's largest dog welfare charity, Dogs Trust understands the lure of welcoming a dog into the home and the incredible joy that a canine companion can bring, but the charity advises that people should avoid rushing in and making a snap decision to get a dog for Christmas.

Dogs Trust encourages potential owners to take time to think and do plenty of research before taking the plunge. As veterinary professionals know, a dog is a massive commitment, one that could last many years. The commitment is not just one of time; it is a financial one too. Along with the cost of food and treats to

think about, other factors to consider include insurance, vaccinations and veterinary treatments, as well as things such as 'doggy-daycare' and dog walking costs.

For those who are confident they can commit financially, it is important that potential owners are aware that dogs also need a lot of work in terms of socialisation and training. Unfortunately, when the necessary investment in training and socialisation is not provided, it can have a huge impact on dogs and their families. Over one-quarter of handover enquiries received by Dogs Trust are from owners struggling with their pet's behaviour.

Some of the issues facing owners include excessive barking, separation anxiety and in some cases, unwanted behaviours such as aggression. Some of these issues may have been prevented with early socialisation and basic training, which is why Dogs Trust set up its free Behaviour Support Line, offering advice to owners and their dogs. Since it launched in 2022, the Behaviour Support Line has helped thousands of struggling families who were considering handing their dogs over to be rehomed, meaning many more dogs will be happily spending Christmas at home this year.

This commitment to socialisation and training is especially important to consider when getting a dog over the Christmas period. Many homes are extra busy during the festive season, and those considering getting a dog at Christmas need to think about whether they have the time needed to support their dog to settle in and adjust before being inundated with visitors.

When everything has been considered and the decision has been made to go ahead with adopting or buying a dog, potential owners

must make sure they are doing their research and choosing the right dog for their family and home. Dogs Trust encourages people looking to welcome a dog into their home to consider adopting one of the dogs currently being cared for in its 21 rehoming centres around the country. The charity assesses each dog individually, and these assessments help to understand how the dog is likely to respond to a range of experiences and situations and enables the charity to identify the right home environment for each dog.

For those buying puppies, once the breed has been decided, it's essential to find a responsible breeder who puts the health and welfare of the dogs first, and for buyers to be able to recognise any signs of a poorly puppy, or red flags about the dog's environment. Unfortunately, Dogs Trust is seeing a rise in the number of pregnant dogs being brought into UK illegally as smugglers look to cash in on the growing popularity of dogs. This includes popular breeds including Dachshunds, Bichons and Pomeranians. As many of these dogs have been smuggled in horrendous conditions, their pups can have behaviour or health issues as a result.

Clients should be advised to see the puppy it with its mum in their home and visit more than once. It should also be emphasised that no money should be exchanged until the puppy has been seen and the buyers feel completely happy – they should not feel pressured into buying and should walk away if unsure.

More information on things to consider before buying or adopting a dog, and caring for your dog over the Christmas period, can be found on the Dogs Trust website (<https://www.dogstrust.org.uk>). **CA**