

Responsible Pet Guardianship

Responsible pet guardianship demands a commitment to provide for the physical, behavioral and psychological needs of a pet for his or her entire lifetime. The day a new pet comes home marks the beginning of a special friendship. Through the years, that pet will never outgrow the need for his or her guardian's care and protection.

The decision to acquire a pet requires special care and consideration, especially for people living in multi-unit housing. Pets can become scapegoats for non-pet-related disputes, so pet guardians must be model residents in every way so as not to jeopardize both individual animals and the privilege of caring for a pet. By ensuring that their neighbors, other animals, and the environment are not negatively affected, pet guardians will help to build an even more rewarding relationship with their pets.



I want to adopt a pet but want to be sure I know what I'm getting into. How can I know I'm ready?

Any prospective pet guardian, but especially a resident of multi-family housing, needs to answer the following questions before bringing an animal into the home:

- *Do I have time to care for a pet properly?* It takes time to train, exercise, and groom a pet. Small or medium-sized dogs can live happily in small apartments but must be walked at least twice daily.
- *Am I financially able to provide for my pet's needs?* This includes food, supplies, a license, and veterinary care.
- *Am I willing to obey the laws related to animal care and control?* Become familiar with your housing unit's regulations on pets and your community's licensing and leash laws.
- *Do I have my landlord's or condo board's consent to bring an animal into my home?* Never attempt to sneak your pet into a "no pets" building. It can only lead to trouble for you and your pet.
- *Am I willing to have my cat or dog spayed or neutered?* This essential part of responsible pet guardianship will produce a more sociable pet and ensure that he or she does not contribute to pet overpopulation. See page two for more information about the importance of spaying and neutering.

Opening doors in San Francisco

Faced with the challenge of finding "pet friendly" rentals, countless animal lovers in San Francisco have turned to the Open Door program at The San Francisco SPCA.

The SPCA encourages property owners to rent to responsible pet guardians and supports the efforts of residents searching for pet-friendly housing. The Open Door program offers many services for property owners and residents, including a referral list and much more on-line at the San Francisco SPCA's Open Door website:
www.sfspca.org/opendoor.html.



- *Have I examined my own motives for getting a pet?* Do you want to give love and companionship as well as receive it? What are your needs and expectations? Is living with a pet the best way to meet those needs and expectations?
- *Do I have a support system to ensure that my pet will be taken care of even if I can no longer do so myself?* In the event of your illness or death, your pet will need consistent, loving care.
- *Am I at home during the day, and if not, do I have a regular schedule? Do I travel frequently?* If your schedule prevents you from providing consistent care for your pet, perhaps you should forego getting a pet at this time in your life.
- *Can I make provisions for pet care if I must be away from home temporarily?* A reliable alternate caretaker is essential in case you are delayed getting home, are called out of town unexpectedly, or become ill.

What kind of pet is best for me?

The decision to adopt a pet can be the beginning of a mutually rewarding friendship. But before your heart melts at the sight of soulful eyes or a wagging tail, you need to think carefully about the kind of pet that will fit into your lifestyle over the long term. A dog's average life span is 12 years, a cat's 16. Will your animal companion be able to depend on you now and in the future? Questions you should ask include:

- *What is the history of the animal?* Was he or she given up by a previous guardian? What was the reason? Will the previous guardian, shelter or rescue group take the animal back if your new pet is not a good match?
- *How old is the animal?* Has he or she been socialized with other animals and people? Is the animal comfortable with children and lots of activity, or is he or she more of a "one person pet"?
- *Is the animal housebroken or paper trained?* If you don't have the time and patience to train a new puppy or kitten, consider adopting an older animal – you'll have less work and fewer surprises.
- *What are the physical or behavioral needs of this particular animal or breed?* Does his or her temperament match your own? Avoid the temptation to acquire an oversized or "macho" dog for protection. Even small dogs can be effective watchdogs, and they are much more likely to be welcome in multi-unit housing.

- *Has the animal been housed in a kennel, a shelter, or a backyard?* Are you welcome to inspect the facilities? It is best to acquire a pet from a source where the guardian or the staff helps to match your interests with the prospective pet's needs.

- *Is the animal in good health?* Is the dog or cat bright-eyed and energetic? Are his or her coat and ears clean and free from parasites? Does he or she respond to you? What information is available about the animal's shots and medical history?

- *If an animal is presented as a gift, am I taking enough time to decide to accept him or her?* An animal should never be acquired on impulse – yours or anyone else's.

How important is spaying and neutering?

You and your pet will both benefit from having your pet sterilized. Sterilized pets tend to be more gentle and affectionate, and they live more happily indoors. Spaying (for females) and neutering (for males) are simple procedures, performed under anesthesia at your veterinarian's office. They can help your pet lead a happier and healthier life in the following ways:

- Spaying prevents female pets from having kittens or puppies, thus eliminating the health risks and expenses that accompany pregnancy, delivery and motherhood. Surgical sterilization also prevents diseases of the reproductive system in both males and females.
- Spaying or neutering removes a pet's urge to roam in search of a mate. Females no longer go into heat, with the accompanying yowling and carpet staining. Male cats and dogs no longer gather outside for nightly serenades.
- Male cats no longer need to spray the furniture to mark their territory. Male cats and dogs who go outside have fewer fights with other animals, as they no longer need to compete for mates. They are less likely to be hit by cars, because they are more inclined to stay close to home.
- Spaying or neutering need not be expensive. Most humane societies can help people find low-cost sterilization programs in their local communities. (See page 4 for information about low-cost programs)
- Spaying and neutering are necessary to stop the tragedy of pet overpopulation. Each year, millions of healthy animals across the country must be destroyed simply because homes for them cannot be found. We each need to take action to stop adding more litters to our already overburdened communities.

Pet Overpopulation: the sad statistics

- One female cat and her offspring can produce 420,000 cats in seven years.¹
- One female dog and her offspring can produce 67,000 dogs in six years.²
- An estimated four to six million cats and dogs are killed in shelters each year. Millions more are abandoned, only to suffer from illness or injury before dying.³
- Over 56% of dogs and puppies and 71% of cats and kittens entering shelters are euthanized, based on reports from over 1,055 facilities across America.⁴

¹ The Humane Society of the United States, "Pet Overpopulation Facts" (1999).

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ National Council on Pet Overpopulation Study and Policy, "Shelter Statistics Survey" (1997 data).



Nine-to-five dogs

As more people work full-time, more dogs are also becoming nine-to-fivers. Although many dogs can adjust to a life alone during the day, others may be lonely, bored or frustrated. They may turn, as a result, to destructive or undesirable behavior: barking, whining or destructive chewing.

There are ways to put more human companionship into your dog's life. For example:

- Tailor where you live and/or work so you can go home on your lunch hour and spend a little time with your dog.
- Find a reliable teenager in the neighborhood who could walk, play games and visit with your dog. Be sure to equip your dog with a sturdy nylon collar and a strong leash, and that his or her tags are up-to-date.
- Consider dog-sharing, or dog-sitting. Perhaps someone in your neighborhood who is at home during the day – older people, stay-at-home parents – would enjoy having some canine companionship.



What are my responsibilities as a pet guardian?

A responsible guardian provides for an animal's physical and emotional needs with love and commitment to his or her well-being. Actions you should take to keep your animal healthy and happy (and in good standing with your neighbors):

- Spay or neuter your pets and keep their vaccinations up to date. If you cannot afford to spay or neuter your pet at market rates, call your local animal shelter to see if they have a low-cost spay/neuter program. If your income is low, try calling SPAY USA at 1-800-248-SPAY (1-800-248-7729) to see if they can refer you to a veterinarian in your area who will spay or neuter pets at a reduced rate for people with low incomes. You can also call Friends of Animals at 1-800-321-PETS for information on their low-cost spay/neuter program, which is available to everyone.
- License your pets with your local government. Make sure they wear a collar with their license and identification tags.
- Keep fleas and ticks under control at all times. Ask your vet about preventative medicines for fleas, ticks and heartworms.
- Always clean up after your pet and dispose of the waste in a sanitary manner.
- Always keep your dog on a leash when he or she is outside your dwelling or in common areas of your apartment complex or condominium.
- Do not let your dog bark for long periods of time. Barking dogs may need more exercise, attention, or the company of another animal.
- Keep your cat indoors for his or her own safety and to prevent him or her from becoming a nuisance to your neighbors.
- Provide your animals with fresh water and food, attention, and adequate exercise every day.
- Keep a file with your pet's health record, obedience training, references from previous landlords, and information on who can care for your pet if you have an emergency. Put the file where it can be easily located for quick reference.

This reprint is courtesy of Doris Day Animal League (www.ddal.org) and MSPCA (www.mspsca.org)

In Defense of Animals • 131 Camino Alto, Mill Valley, CA 94941
(415) 388-9641 • ida@idausa.org • www.idausa.org

