Dogs, Cats, and Other People: Dogs and seniors

by Michael_Kinsman

"I bought my mom a Yorkie for her birthday."

"Yorkie, huh? Cute breed. How old is your mom?"

"She's 92."

And so began the story that, all told, included four trips to the hospital in five months for Mom, as she repeatedly tripped over, tangled with and stepped on her rambunctious gift. Happy birthday!

The potential benefits to pairing the elderly with pets are immeasurable, but clearly there are risks to consider.

Large dogs can knock a frail person to the ground. Hyperactive or herding breeds require a lot of exercise and attention. Longhaired dogs tend to shed more, creating extra housework and requiring frequent grooming. Many purebreds and older dogs have health problems of their own, meaning frequent trips to the vet, medication and special care.

Basically, any dog can be a handful in the wrong hands. Or, as in the case of the birthday girl, under the wrong feet.

Small dogs tend to get underfoot. Remember Paula Abdul? Made famous by her talent as a dancer, Abdul lost her balance and fell on her face trying to avoid stepping on her Chihuahua.

Toy dogs send their senior owners to the emergency room with broken hips, broken arms, broken legsâ€¦ And a broken bone can lead to major complications for an elderly person â€” physical, psychological and financial complications that can take a lasting toll on the individual's quality of life.

This is why training and foresight are essential.

Foresight means you've considered the risks outlined above and reached the decision that you are able to successfully navigate them. In giving the gift of a dog to an elderly person, foresight means asking hard questions:

â€” Will the dog outlive the person? Most dogs live about 15 years. If the recipient is 92, who will take care of the dog once that person is gone? A shelter should not be the answer.

â€” Can the recipient take care of the dog? Walk the dog? Remember to feed and water the dog? If not, who will?

â€” Can the person drive the dog to the vet and take charge of any medical needs that arise? If not, who will?

â€” Does the person want the responsibility of a dog? After all, the point of a gift is to bring joy, not stress, to the life of another.

After foresight comes training. Training prevents accidents â€” for the person and the pooch. No dog enjoys being run over by a wheelchair. And a dog properly trained to sit and stay will not only be out of harm's way, but will be the kind of calm, reassuring presence from which an elderly person might benefit.

And the benefits are many and not to be overlooked: companionship, protection, the establishment of a daily routine, the great feeling of having a purpose and being needed, not to mention the physical benefits of exercise, playfulness, the smile a dog brings to the face and the relaxation induced by stroking his fur.

But before you give the gift of canine companionship, make sure the hard questions are asked and answered. And don't underestimate the need â€” and value â€” of professional training.

After suggesting to her well-meaning son that it makes no sense to give a 92-year-old woman an untrained puppy, he indignantly replied, "Who has the money for professional dog training?"

Answer me this: Who has the money for four hospital stays in almost as many months?

Woof!

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