

## **Loving all creatures great and small**

By Jane Whiting

I was taking Nelson, my aging English Cocker Spaniel, on his usual walk in the park the other day. It's something we've both enjoyed for the last 13 years. And, as the park is bordered by two elementary schools, it's also an occasional treat for young kids as well.

Sometimes, a small group will run over to Nelson and bombard me with questions: "Can I pat your dog? Is it a boy or girl? What's his name – how old is he?"

After I answer them and confirm that he's safe to pat, they often tell me about their pets and some say that they'd love a dog or cat, but can't have one. Then I rescue Nelson from their loving attention and move on with a warm feeling that we've all just benefited from a happy animal-bonding encounter.

So, imagine my surprise when I was recently approached by a school teacher who informed me that I shouldn't even walk my dog in the park during school hours. She cited possible allergies to animals and cultural attitudes towards dogs for her reasoning. Being aware of these issues and sensitive to the fact that not everyone is a dog-lover, I always keep Nelson on a leash in public places and never instigate a greeting even though he's a friendly, well-behaved boy.

While I understood her concerns, I thought how sad it was that she felt it necessary to deprive a few school-children of the experience of meeting a quiet dog under the supervision of a mature adult. I could have argued that surely kids who are afraid of dogs would not approach one, allergic children would be instructed to keep their distance – and wouldn't the rest benefit from learning how to behave and be safe around animals?

As a responsible dog owner and a mother of three (who have all survived into adulthood) I was concerned about the over-anxious and fearful attitude towards a leashed, good-tempered pet that was not near any children at the time. It's a shame because, these days, most city kids have few opportunities to interact with animals, let alone know how to treat them or care for one. Having a pet is a wonderful learning experience that fosters nurturing skills and teaches kids how to respect another animal.

In fact, if studies have linked cruelty to animals with bullying and physical abuse, then perhaps the opposite is true: a love of animals may extend to more peaceful human relations. On this note, it's definitely the time of year when we traditionally think of others, whether they belong to the two- or four-legged species!

As a rule, animal experts do not recommend buying a family pet as a holiday gift when homes are often busy with already overly-excited kids. This can add too much stress to a household and make the settling-in process difficult. However, it is a popular decision and can work if families are well-prepared to facilitate a pet and have a planned routine to make the transition time as quiet and calm as possible.

If owning a family pet is not on the list, there are many other ways that kids can get involved in an animal's life, like offering to walk a dog. Perhaps the neighbours, friends or family members are going away and need someone to look after their furry or feathery pets. Some animal shelters and humane societies often need foster care over the holidays to give their staff a well-deserved break.

For families who cannot care for a pet at home, but still want to help an animal in need – think about making a donation of time or money. Responsible older kids may be able to volunteer at animal shelters or a veterinarian practice. You can also give a one-time gift or offer ongoing support for homeless and abused animals. The Ottawa Humane Society has a PAW member program, where in return for a prearranged monthly contribution, you receive a regular report and newsletter about the animals. In addition, they accept a wide range of animal supplies and equipment such as a crate, bedding or food.

So, during the holidays when we think of giving generously to others in need, consider adding our furry friends to the list. Here's to wishing that sharing the love will include all two- and four-legged creatures!

***For more ideas to support local animals in need contact:***

- **The Ottawa Humane Society.** Call 613-725-3166 or visit online at [www.ottawahumane.ca](http://www.ottawahumane.ca). Or call the **SPCA of Western Quebec** in Alymer 819-770-7722 and visit the website at [www.alymer-hull-spca.qc.ca](http://www.alymer-hull-spca.qc.ca).
- **Ontario Dog Rescue Organizations and Shelters - Canada's Guide to Dogs.** A non-profit dog rescue in Ottawa for lost, stray and abandoned cats and dogs. Online at [www.canadaguidetodogs.com](http://www.canadaguidetodogs.com).

- **Dog and Cat Adoption and Rescue.** To adopt a pet visit online at [www.adoptapet.com](http://www.adoptapet.com)
- **Ottawa Dog Blog.** Hopeful Hearts is a non-profit *shelter in Ottawa*, that *Rescues* dogs, *cats* and farm animals. Visit [www.ottawadogblog.ca](http://www.ottawadogblog.ca).
- **Ottawa-Carleton Humane Society** for special *cat* and *dog* adoptions and animal shelter directory. *Online at* [www.animalshelter.org](http://www.animalshelter.org).

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