



tools of the trade
for family improvement



by Heidi Kiebler-Brogan, M.A., LPC

Pets: A Prescription For Good Health!

As a licensed professional counselor, wife and mother of three school-aged children, I certainly see the difficulties that families are faced with in today's fast paced world. Be sure that whatever you are struggling with, you are likely not alone. We all hit bumps in the road and could use a little help and support from time to time. Check in with me each issue as I offer you some "Tools of the Trade" to help you better manage and enjoy your life and your family.

You have had a horrible day and as you struggle to open your front door with hands full of backpacks, lunch boxes and your briefcase, you are greeted by a crooked grin and wagging tail. Your stress is instantly reduced and you can't help but bend down and give a stroke to the head of your endearing black lab as your worries begin to melt away.

More than half of all US households have companion animals. Although pets are more common in households with children, there are actually more pets than kids in American households. Over 90% of pet owners regard their pet as a valued family member.

Loneliness is one of the greatest problems facing people in this country because it decreases mood and causes difficulty in motivation. Feeling disconnected can create an anxious mood, while isolation and social withdrawal can create a feeling of depression. Psychologically we all need to feel connected in secure relationships to maintain a positive sense of identity and worth.

The benefits of the companionship and love of a pet may go well beyond simple emotional bonds. An ever-growing body of evidence suggests that people who keep pets are likely to benefit from a variety of improvements in health. Several studies have **documented improvement in psychological and physiological health** including lowering blood pressure; shorter hospital stays for adults

over 65 and decreased stress in difficult situations. Studies conducted by the National Institute of Aging and the University of California found significant benefit to keeping dogs in particular. **Dog owners get more exercise**, through daily walks with their faithful friends. Researchers have observed that older adults who own pets are less likely to use physician services unnecessarily.

There are **several benefits to having a pet:**

- Companionship and pleasurable activity
- Facilitate exercise, play, and laughter
- Have something to care for and a source of consistency
- Allow feeling of security
- Are a comfort to touch and a pleasure to watch
- Provide a link with reality to enhance emotional stability
- Become a receptive partner in a relationship of mutual trust that promotes self-awareness
- Provide nonjudgmental acceptance and love
- Are an outlet for one's ancient primate grooming urges
- Improved sense of well-being

Does this mean that you should run to the nearest pet store and buy a dog, cat,



bird or fish? Though much of the research suggests that pet ownership is beneficial to your health, you need to make sure that the pet you choose fits in with your lifestyle, habits, experience and expectations. Tropical fish are relaxing and do not require a daily walk. Parrots are great company and won't eat your new shoes or chew your leather sofa. Dogs cannot mimic your voice, but they are always eager to share their love. And the affection of a cat's purr is one of the simple joys of life.

CHILDREN & DOGS

A word about dogs, easily one of the most popular pets to bring into a family. Not every dog is right for children and not every child is right for a dog. The vast majority of dog/child problems encountered involve children less than six years of age. Do the research and gather as much information as possible on your breed. Parents with small children are usually very busy and do not have the desire or free time required to take on the responsibilities of owning a dog. Many problems occur when dogs are purchased because "it would be good for the kids" or the children begged for one, but the parents were not 100% committed to caring and training the new pet.

By the time children are seven or older some of them are ready to start to develop a rewarding relationship with a dog. **Dogs can help teach a child responsibility, patience, empathy, and compassion**, but remember, no young child is capable of properly training or completely caring for a dog, so the parent must always ultimately take full responsibility for the pet. **Supervision, along with a basic understanding of dog behavior, is the key. If parents are not 100% committed to caring for and training the dog, then I usually discourage them from getting one; it is not fair to the family or the dog.**

DEALING WITH THE DEATH OF A PET

Because our pets ultimately become a cherished part of our lives, their in-

evitable death can be a traumatic experience for the whole family. Children tend to relate to pets as playmates, so the loss, to a child, is often the loss of a best friend.

Try to help your children understand that it's normal to have painful feelings after a loss and that it helps them to express them; young children may have an easier time drawing and using other forms of nonverbal expression. If your pet was injured or sick, explain to your children that your pet is no longer in pain and that you are happy for that. Children do best with simple, honest, straightforward answers to their questions. It's also helpful for the child to see that you are grieving. You are a role model for handling difficult situations and feelings. And while many parents are reluctant to have their children see them upset, when you say, "I am sad because I miss Boots, too" you show your child how normal it is to grieve.

Don't rush out to replace your cherished pet. Allow the process of grief and recovery to run its course. Your child may not be ready to give a new pet the same love and attention. Create a memorial that honors the pet's life. You might create a special garden, make a photo album, or write the story of your pet's life. Once the ball is rolling, your children may surprise you with their creativity.

Take some time to look into the health benefits of pet ownership. Do your research and learn as much as possible before making your choice. When filled properly, a pet prescription can provide unconditional love, a dramatic improvement in stress reduction and an enhanced feeling of emotional wellness and peace.

The purpose of this column is to provide you with some "tools" that can be used in a variety of households and situations. I encourage you to adapt what you have learned to meet your needs and the needs of your individual family. If you have any questions about this topic, or have a suggestion for another article please contact me: Heidi Kiebler-Brogan, M.A., Licensed Professional Counselor at I. E. Counseling 908-456-1871 or email me at hkbrogan@iecounseling.com.