

Cute, cuddly and dumped after Christmas



Hi, I'm Chester. I like long walks in the park, meeting new people and digging holes. I also like to eat shoes, poo in the house and never do anything on command.

It always seems like a good idea when you're getting cosy with a bundle of cuteness in the pet store. After all, who could resist a puppy's soft, floppy ears or a kitten's big, blinking eyes? But the reality is that many spur of the moment pet purchases, especially those around Christmas time, end up being huge mistakes. And it's the animals who suffer most.

Every year, the number of pets abandoned around Christmas increases. So much for the "time of giving". According to Jane Speechly, national public relations officer for RSPCA, every December and January sees a rise in the number of pets dumped at RSPCA shelters around Australia.

WHY ARE WE DUMPING OUR PETS?

"As hard as it may be to believe, many people simply can't be bothered making arrangements for their pets during the holiday period," says Jane. "Some pets are even surrendered to RSPCA shelters as late as Christmas Eve, just before their family heads off on holidays."

But many of the animals received by the RSPCA at this time of year are unwanted Christmas presents. While giving a friend a cute kitten or adorable puppy may seem like a great Christmas gift, people rarely stop to think about the commitment a pet demands from its owner.

The problem, according to Jane, is when the novelty wears off. "It can be fun to play with a kitten or puppy, but what happens when the owner goes back to school or work?" she says. "How will you feel when the puppy or kitten has to be toilet-trained or accidentally ruins your favourite pair of shoes? What will you do when the family wants to plan their next holiday? Often dumping the pet at the nearest shelter seems like an easy way out."

THE SADDEST TIME OF YEAR

While some owners are at least brave enough to take their pets directly to shelters, a lot can't even manage to do that. "Many are dumped somewhere public and left to fend for themselves," says Jane.

When a pet is dumped at a shelter, what happens next depends on the animal and its suitability for being re-homed. Unfortunately, not all the animals who find their way to the RSPCA and other pounds and shelters get a second chance.

Last year alone, the RSPCA received approximately 135,000 animals through its shelters – including around 58,000 dogs and 56,000 cats. Of these, just over half the dogs and one-third of cats were reclaimed or re-homed. This means that more than 22,000 dogs and 35,000 cats were put down.

When a pet arrives at the RSPCA, it's given a thorough medical and behavioural examination. This involves making sure the animal is fit and healthy, and assessing its temperament to see if it is suitable for re-homing (this includes checking for signs of aggression). "Of course, puppies and kittens are much easier to find homes for than animals who are older or not as 'cute'," Jane admits. "But we desperately try to find homes for older animals, too."

One of the saddest things the RSPCA staff have to deal with is when they receive sick or injured animals, as well as animals who have been the victims of abuse, cruelty or neglect. "Wherever possible, we will try to rehabilitate the animals and help them recover," says Jane. "However, sometimes the illness or injuries are just too severe and in those cases the animals would be euthanised [put down]. Also, if an animal has serious behavioural problems, such as aggression or biting, and we don't believe it is safe for it to be sent to a new home, the animal would probably be euthanised."

BEING A RESPONSIBLE PET OWNER

It's up to every pet owner to stop the dumping cycle. Consider Jane's advice before buying a pet for yourself – or giving one to a friend for Christmas.

Don't buy a pet as a gift without considering the consequences very carefully – animals aren't toys! A pet should never be a surprise gift. Make sure you involve everyone in the decision-making process, including anyone who might have a role in caring for the animal.

If you do decide to go ahead, choose a pet that suits your family's lifestyle.

Cats and dogs must be de-sexed and microchipped. A microchip provides a unique number registered to your pet. The chip is implanted under the skin so if the animal gets lost and is taken to a shelter or veterinary clinic, it will be scanned and the owner can be contacted. Dogs should also be registered – check with your local council for more details.

Ask yourself if you can provide your pet with: a safe and secure home, including shelter and comfortable bedding; a balanced, nutritious diet and plenty of fresh water; access to veterinary care, including worming and vaccinations; regular exercise and playtime; and training and socialisation, both with your family and other animals. If you answered yes to these, your pet will be happy, safe and easy to live with!

HOW YOU CAN HELP

"Don't toss pets aside when the going gets tough," says Jane. "In return, they'll give you the best gifts ever – friendship and endless love and devotion." If you'd like to donate to the RSPCA, call 1800 803 355. To give your time as a volunteer, contact your local shelter. Visit www.rspca.org.au for more information.