

**Stoney Creek Veterinary Hospital  
6460 Burlington Rd., Whitsett, NC 27377  
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**Puppies and Kittens as Gifts?**

Christmas time advertisements often picture a happy family with a bright eyed, ribbon adorned puppy licking the children's faces. But, is giving a pet as a gift likely to create a winter wonderland or a potential blue Christmas?

It's a treasured Disney-type memory and has become an icon of Christmas tradition. The tree is lit, the children reach out for the gift box with a huge red bow when the box suddenly shakes. Giggling uncertainly, the children open the box and out pops a puppy, complete with a ribbon around her neck and a wagging tail. In *Lady and the Tramp*, Walt Disney helped to capture a moment that many people fantasize about creating. The unfortunate reality is that many of these Christmas puppies and kittens will fail to see their second Christmas.

Groups as diverse as national veterinary organizations, the Humane Society, breeders, and the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have found common ground during the holiday season. All agree that puppies and kittens are not appropriate gifts. With all this pressure to avoid buying a pet during the holidays, why is it still a common occurrence?

For many people, the adoration and joy that crosses the gift recipient's face is a sight that brings happiness deep into their being. The impulse of providing a good, loving home for a homeless puppy or kitten is a strong motivator for someone looking for the meaning of the holidays. Perhaps it was simply the impulse of seeing a group of playful puppies in the pet store window. Or, perhaps the memory of a holiday pet is a treasured thought from the past.

While all of these reasons may seem sound, the reasons to avoid purchasing a pet during the holidays are more numerous and more compelling. Unlike toys that break and wear out, pets will need constant attention during their lifetimes to keep them happy and healthy. Unlike the new doll or action figure, a holiday puppy cannot be put away in his crate and expected to be quiet. Impulse pet purchases often fail to take into account all of the pet's needs. For example, the breeds of dogs known for their lack of shedding, are often the breeds that need the most professional grooming. And, although the joy of a child receiving his very first puppy is undeniable, how helpful will the child be when it comes to paying for food, medical expenses, or training? Will the child be able to effectively help with all the education that the puppy needs during this critical socialization period?

Also, the atmosphere of the holidays is rarely conducive to training or helping a new pet adjust to strange surroundings. Many animal behaviorists speak of the age frame from 7 to 12 weeks as the first fear/avoidance period. This means that many of the fears learned during this period can be difficult to overcome in the future. Imagine the puppy or kitten's state of mind as they attempt to deal with the trauma of leaving mom and

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siblings, the noises of holiday music and children's voices, and the general festive nature of the season. It can be overwhelming and frightening to say the least.

Timing can also be a factor. Will you, as the pet owner, be prepared for a potential emergency room visit for the pet over the holidays? Many veterinary offices are closed or have limited office hours during this season. What about housebreaking? In a good portion of North America, the holiday season falls during a time when snow and ice covers the ground. Are you willing to walk the new family member out into the chill night air and wait while she decides where she needs to go?

How well do you know the breed (or species) of pet you have chosen? Will your landlord approve? How about your home owner's insurance? What will your relatives think when your brand new pride and joy reminds you that he is not housebroken while visiting at your mother's house?

If these reasons are not enough for you, then perhaps a reason that resounds with finality may sway you. The number one reason for euthanasia in the United States is behavior problems. Although accurate numbers may never be truly known, it is estimated that a large majority of dogs and cats in the US never reach their second birthday, despite having a natural lifespan of 10 to 18 years.

As we welcome our pets into our homes and our families, it is important to remember that they will need time to learn and adjust to us as well. Talk to your veterinarian about breed specifics and the pros and cons of adopting a mixed breed pet. Find a quiet, non-holiday time to help your new friend adjust to her environment. Give her the best chance to give you many years of devotion, love, and affection.