

The Prism of Pets

By Dawn Wink

“Your kids need pets,” my friend announced to me one day. “My neighbor’s hamster has had like 10,000 babies and I’m going to give one to each of your kids.

“My kids do *not* need pets,” I returned. “And they most certainly do not need rodents!”

The next day, three popcorn-sized Russian Dwarf hamsters became a part of our family—each with a cage the size of a New York high-rise.

That was three years ago. The menagerie we call home now includes: two gerbils, two hamsters, two parakeets, one rabbit, one guinea pig, one spotted leopard gecko, one beta fish, and oh, yes, one enormous and highly exuberant black German Shepard.

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When adults come to our house for the first time, their eyes widen in amazement and they exclaim, “Are you *crazy*?”

And then comes the inevitable “Why?”—A question that pops frequently into my own mind at times—like when I’m half way back to my home in Eldorado after a long day at work and realize I’ve forgotten to buy crickets and Cheetah the gecko absolutely *must* have crickets that evening and I have to wheel my car back around in the direction of PetSmart.

So why? Sure, I could recount the infinite pedagogical, emotional, and developmental benefits to kids who grow up loving and caring for animals. It’s not a stretch to know what’s better for their brain development—to sit in front of a computer or video game of graphic images switching every few seconds, or curl up on the couch and read a book with a creature nestled on their chests. When friends come over, the pets work as a primary focus that involves collaboration: What can we build to them? Can I hold him? The first words out of my kids’ mouths when adults visit is, “Want to see my pets?” Thus engaging the kids with adults in conversation in which they’re the expert. How children learn to treat animals in their childhood is a significant indicator for how they’ll treat people in adulthood. Learning the responsibility of caring for another living being and all that goes with that is hugely important. I grew up on a cattle ranch where caring for animals was an intrinsic component of life. Since we live in town

now I can't give them horses and steers, but I can give them hamsters and guinea pigs. And yes, all of this factors in enormously to my decision to have animals.

But it's much deeper than that.

For the kids, their animals are central to being *Home*. After school, the first thing Wyatt (11), Luke (9), and Wynn (8) do after dumping their backpacks, is head immediately to their rooms, and each will wander back out in a few minutes cuddling some creature. I watch the day melt away and a calm slide into their bodies and eyes. If they're having a rough day, they go immediately and find a pet. Some instinctual part of them knows that's what they need—a touchstone with a heartbeat. Tension ebbs from their bodies, replaced with a sense of grounding and peace. A real-life reflection of studies that show blood pressure lowers in the presence of pets.

A typical day in our house includes kids on the couch reading with a guinea pig curled into a soft pillow on their chests, a gecko peeking out of a bathrobe, hamsters running circles around the brim of my grandfather's Shriner's hat, or kids building elaborate mazes and castles that hamsters scurry through—AND, crickets meant to feed the gecko get loose, making our house sound more like Iowa in summer than Santa Fe in winter, pets escape, they scatter bedding everywhere, sometimes bite, and poop. They poop *a lot*.

If I were to tally the hours I've spent trying to find escaped pets and then capturing them, well, it's better that I don't. Last week I spent an hour standing over the dryer, net in hand, still as a Maasai hunter, waiting for Tickle the gerbil to leave the protection of the dryer far enough for me to swoop in with a net.

And they die. It's horrible. If I've ever regretted my kids having pets, it has been at hearing their hearts break when one of their pets dies. One evening last summer, Luke walked into the kitchen and said, "Mom?" and turned around and walked back into his room. I followed him and found him sitting on his bed cradling his beloved hamster in his hands. The hamster was obviously in the final minutes of life. I sat behind Luke and he leaned back into me. I said, "What a gift that he got to be held by you as he dies, Luke." Though, frankly, I don't think either of us believed it at the time. We both wept—Luke for his hamster and me for Luke. We buried him under the hollyhocks in our flower garden and talked about how now every year he'll live on through the hollyhocks. So the kids also learn that death is a part of life, much as it hurts, and that life goes on.

Our general rule about pets tends to be, if one dies, I'll buy that child another. If they want to add an animal on their own, they have to pay for the pet and whatever it needs out of their allowance. The evening the hamster died, I found my daughter thrown out on her bed sobbing. Knowing I would buy another pet for Luke, Wynn looked up at me, tears streaming down her face, "Why don't *my* pets ever die?"

That night I went to bed really early.

Now, every time I enter the house, my first thought is, "Please God, let them all be alive and enclosed."

There are the inevitable conflicts of interest where so many animals live in a rather small space. We returned home one time to find what we now refer to in whispers as *the great hamster massacre*. Our dog, O'Keeffe, had nosed opened the door to the kids' bedroom and entered. I'll leave it at that. To prevent this from happening again, we put hook-locks on the outside of their bedroom doors. Something I forget about, until a new guest visited our home, looked at me as if I were Harry Potter's Aunt Petunia, and said incredulously, "You *lock* your children in their rooms?"

You get it all with pets: laughter, endless messes to clean up, peace, heartbreak, and love. Just like life.

Ultimately, it is all about love—giving and receiving love. It's reflected in the meeting of two pair of soft, warm eyes—one animal and one human. It's giggles of delight so pure they cast their light in a wide net under us all. It's the soft, open place animals find in a child's heart in which a spiritual compassion for living things grows. As a parent, if I can blow a bit on that ember of love, it will hopefully become more and more an essential component of their humanity.

When you look directly into a prism, each small cut of the glass contains a complete scene—a mosaic of tiny representations of a far larger whole. Each pet represents one of those tiny, unabridged scenes reflected on that slice of glass. Living through the prism of pets allows kids to experience aspects of a far greater whole, deepening their understandings about the world, and of life itself.