

**The following article written by Daniel "DK" Kurnick, a sophomore at Friends' Central School, and was published in The Philadelphia Inquirer. Many thanks to DK for giving permission to reprint it.

Things to Think About Before Getting a Pet

Now that the First Family is getting a pet, everyone wants one. But before running out to buy one, give it some thought. As a volunteer who works with live animals at the Academy of Natural Sciences, I am amazed at how many questions visitors ask about caring for their own pets — questions that should have been addressed before the acquisition of the critter. I like answering questions, but suggest you ask yourself the following before adding to your family:

Where am I going to put it? Contrary to popular belief, that thing on a turtle's back does not function as a mobile home. Animal enclosures are bigger than you'd think. So it's important to find out how much space the animal actually needs.

Will this thing get bigger? Most animals that are bought on a whim tend to be on the younger side, and small things usually get bigger. You can probably fit that baby iguana into a 40-gallon aquarium, but the next thing you know, it's seven feet long and needs an enclosure bigger than your closet. So double check the adult size of the animal.

Can I squeeze it in between lunch and my conference call? If you barely have time in your day to feed yourself, how can you expect to give your puppy the two to three meals a day that it needs? What about walks? Some dogs will not only be unhappy without enough exercise, but they will decide to turn your house into an obstacle course. Make sure you have the time to devote to the animal.

Do I want to take care of this for the next 15 to 20 years? Dogs and cats live anywhere from 8 to 20 years. That leopard gecko (average lifespan 20 to 25 years) for your 10-year-old will probably end up being yours long after your kid has gone to college. Do you really believe your child will feed and clean it? In my experience, parents do most of the work.

Can I stomach what it eats? If you can't handle a bag of mice in your freezer, it's probably not a good idea to buy a snake. Many animals are picky (and spoiled), and require specific food items for proper nutrition. So look up what the animal eats and make sure you can keep it up.

Will it pay for room and board? Sure the turtle costs 30 bucks, but the tank costs about \$150, basking lamp costs \$50, the floating platform costs \$15, the food costs \$10, the water conditioner costs... AHH! Animals need more than just a cage to sit in; they need important accessories to stay happy and alive. So, find out what your pet needs and add up the costs. Then compare the actual cost of the pet to what you're willing to spend.

Am I willing to become better acquainted with the animal's poop? Some types of animals do this dirty deed more often than others, but they all do it, and it's always your job to clean it up. Will that bird look as cute when you're scraping the droppings off its cage floor? Think long and hard about this concept, because you'll be addressing it for a long time.

Is it a problem that the store failed their last inspection? I meet people daily who don't know what type of turtle they have because the guy at the roadside stand they bought it from didn't know either. Even stores are not always reliable. A dirty store will probably produce a dirty animal. If you see that the enclosure isn't exactly tidy, expect to rack up a large vet bill. Do some online research. If someone claims that their animal died the day after they brought it home from that store, yours may not last very long either.

Can't I just give it some baby Tylenol? Animals get sick and need check-ups, and vets aren't cheap. It costs an awful lot of money to keep an animal happy and healthy, so make sure you've got room in your monthly budget to get your puppy his shots.

Will I still want this tomorrow? Can you imagine what would happen if parents gave away their children because they got bored? It happens quite often with animals. The desire for a pet can be a phase, and like all phases, it can pass. The best way to make sure that this doesn't happen is wait before buying a pet.