

Parental guidance: Caring for a new puppy

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My elementary-school-age daughter was thrilled that Santa brought her the puppy she'd asked him for. How much responsibility should I realistically expect her to take for the care of the animal?

Getting a puppy is like getting a new iPod with no apps on it, says Ines De Pablo, president and owner of Wag'n Enterprises, a Virginia-based pet safety company. "You have to load your apps," she says. That means you, as the parent, need to take initial responsibility for training the dog; consider obedience classes so the animal learns basic

commands like "sit" and "stay," she says. You can get suggestions from a store that caters to pets, she says.

Start the child off with simpler tasks, such as cleaning the dog's crate and preparing its food. You also can have her be in charge of putting the leash on the dog for its walk. Have the child walk the dog with you, but don't immediately expect her to do it alone, De Pablo says. The dog might be stronger than she is.

"You should not put the child in charge of everything," De Pablo says. "And don't just put them in charge of the dog with no supervision."

Before taking the dog to a dog park for the first time, take your child over alone. Show her how to enter the park without letting other dogs escape, and let her see how the dogs interact so she will be familiar with dog behavior, De Pablo says.

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