

Having a Pet: Is it for You?

The Advantages and Challenges of Pets for Solo Moms

When I was approached three years ago about my daughter possibly receiving a horse for her birthday, I was more than a bit apprehensive. Sure she was going to be starting a part-time job so could afford the reduced board herself but *owning* a horse? That would be a *lot* of responsibility! Sure she had been riding for seven years and trained this horse entirely by herself, but was she up to ownership? Was *I* up to it? How could I not agree though? She was, and, thankfully, still is obsessed with horses! The two of them are two peas in a pod.

Animals are wonderful; they are resourceful, resilient and filled with unconditional love and trust. Pets teach us lessons. They teach everyone responsibility and respect and how to care for and love another unconditionally.

At some point in our lives, each of us has had a pet; could have been a dog or cat, a guinea pig or rabbit, or maybe even a rock. Either way, we built a relationship with another species and parts of that relationship have helped make us who we are today. Most of us have stories we can tell about wet noses and nuzzles and we not only think of all the positives we took away from our family pets but we want our children to have that same experience.

There are plenty of positive reasons for having a pet that include health benefits, such as a reduction in blood pressure and anxiety, as well as for safety, security and companionship, all of which may be exactly what you need.

As Solo Moms, we spend a lot of time giving a lot and getting very little in return. Our children are like sponges where love is concerned and they aren't able to give much back. Unless we have an excellent support system in place, we don't get very much emotional support from anyone. Pets, especially dogs and cats, can greatly fill that void as they have plenty of love to help us refuel.

But can you justify getting a pet? You already go it alone with the parenting. Can you take on the additional commitment of a pet too? You need to have the time and financial ability to commit to having a pet.

If your kids really want to get a pet and you are limited in one or both areas, small animals live in cages and tend to be happy with any time and attention they receive, don't usually require vet care and the cost of food is reasonable. You *may* be able to get away with not vaccinating a cat who is kept strictly indoors because they don't come into contact with other animals, therefore greatly reducing their risk but they do require a great deal of attention as do dogs, who *have* to go outside, love going for walks, want to curl up near you and will need annual vet check-ups and vaccinations.

Is it worth it?

There have been plenty of burdens placed on me since that birthday gift. The part-time job only lasted a year so I had to pick up the tab on board. As with any animal, there is also a need to be at the barn more frequently since the horse can't come home which has also impacted my schedule. Thankfully my daughter is over sixteen so she is able to teach lessons to help offset the cost of board and I agreed to help her do chores one evening a week, though this has had an even bigger impact on my already stretched schedule.

The best part about all of it is that I love that horse as if she was mine. I spoil her more than my daughter sometimes. I give her hugs and I accept many of her sloppy kisses in a visit. In the freezing cold of winter, I wish I could bring her home and keep her warm. I cheer her over jumps and I have more than 3000 photos of the two of them! My emotional attachment to her is the same as to my daughter, my cat and my parent's (our family) dogs. It is an almost indescribable feeling and one I wouldn't trade for anything in the world.

When it takes every ounce of strength I have to get to the barn, once I see our palomino pony and she gives me a kiss and I watch the two of them together, I couldn't be more than grateful for her being a part of our lives. I also have a cat at home who also helps restore my emotional stores and though I *should* be home with him more than I am due to work and barn commitments, it's still worth it when he curls up next to me at night and I fall asleep listening to him purr.

Most of the time, having a pet outweighs not having one. Children learn responsibility and, as a Solo Mom, you gain companionship and the unconditional love that only comes from an animal.