

A Blessed Childhood

Just two weeks ago, my daughter was a pig-tailed five year old, sloshing through the pouring rain and mud in the LCA National Specialty PeeWee Handler ring with her beloved Yuma. Later, in dry clothes and fiercely determined to stay awake so as not to miss the raffle, she lost the battle and fell asleep curled up against Yuma's soft, warm chest under the table in the banquet room.

Our family vacations were yearly trips to the Leonberger Club of America's National Specialty, and thanks to our life in dogs our little girl from Connecticut got to see so much of our vast country from the back seat of our Suburban. We worked in trips to all the Little House sites where favorite author Laura Ingalls Wilder lived, and pretended we were modern day pioneers as we crossed the Appalachians, plains, the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada ranges. . Much of Molly's childhood and adolescence was spent in the same manner— living, loving, traveling and working with her dogs and learning so much along the way.

Whether they grow up in a family that is heavily involved in the purebred dog fancy or with a treasured pet dog, research has proven time and again that kids who grow up with dogs reap benefits that far outweigh the negatives that so many parents use as excuses not to include a dog in the family— “Germs!” and “So much extra work!” and “All that hair!” Yes, with dogs come the predictable messes, hair, vet bills, and other inconveniences to busy family life. But as researchers at Oregon State University found, teaching children to care for a puppy enhanced their social skills and ability to feel empathy. Having a pet, the study concluded, improves children's role taking skills because they have to put themselves in the pet's position and try to feel how the pet feels. That transfers to being able to understand how fellow students feel.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry states that caring for a dog teaches children important personal lessons as well. Experiencing, learning about and coping with illnesses, accidents, life, death and bereavement, though difficult and wrenching, are central themes in life. Facing these issues with a beloved pet is never easy, but having that store of knowledge and understanding allows children to draw on those experiences when confronting similar trials in later life.

Truth is, it wasn't just two weeks ago. It was thirteen years ago, and now we are preparing to send our only child off to college. She wrote her college admissions essays about her experiences competing and titling in the breed, obedience, rally, weight pulling and draft rings and the many life lessons she learned along the way. Though this will be an adjustment for all of us, for Molly, it will mark the first time in her life that she has not shared her life with dogs. Every day of her life, dogs have been her sounding board, her friend, her playmate and her only siblings. In our estimation, she is so much the richer for having grown up in the company of Good Dogs.

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