



Pets look cute under the tree, but B.C. animal-care groups discourage giving them as gifts. Instead, create a gift certificate offering to pay the adoption fee for a pet, and gift-wrap supplies — like leashes and collars. DANIELLE NAHERNIAK — FOR THE PROVINCE.

## Getting pets a family affair

Impulse buying, especially at Christmas, can lead to lots of heartbreak

BY CORRY ANDERSON-FENNELL  
SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE

By the time he was nine weeks old, an akita puppy named Boots had already lived in three places: The home where he was born, the house where he was given as a gift and the animal shelter where he was dropped off two days later.

Kathleen Embree, who manages the Campbell River SPCA where Boots ended up, still recalls the teary-eyed teen who dropped him off.

"He was given to her as a gift but her parents, who already had two dogs and two cats at home, wouldn't let her keep him. The person who gave her Boots wouldn't take him back, so she had few alternatives."

A fluffy, energetic puppy,

Boots found a new home within the week. But Embree says the whole sad matter could have been avoided if getting a pet was always a family decision.

"Every member of the family needs to be involved in the process and every member of the family needs to be comfortable with the decision. If even one person is unhappy — maybe they have allergies, maybe they find having a pet too expensive, maybe they didn't anticipate how much care is required — more often than not it's the animal who pays the price with a ride to the local shelter."

With the Christmas gift-giving season in full swing, the BC SPCA and other rescue groups are trying to discourage purchasing pets as gifts. The

reason is these organizations regularly deal with the aftermath. And unlike the tacky Christmas sweater and the obligatory fruitcake that can be returned or re-gifted, unwanted animals are more difficult to manage.

"They're given with the best intentions, but often with the most disastrous results," says Embree. "Impulse-buying overlooks the long-term commitment involved in caring for a pet."

Giving a pet as a gift is discouraged at any time of year, not just at Christmas. The Burnaby-based Small Animal Rescue Society inevitably sees a spike in surrendered bunnies every October, when the novelty of the baby bunny purchased as a gift at Easter wears off.

"This is when the rabbit's hormones kick in, their behaviour suddenly changes and the kids lose interest," says SARS' Lisa Hutcheon.

"We get about 100 requests to take unwanted bunnies at that time."

If kids want a bunny for Easter, says Hutcheon, "choose chocolate" or get to know what caring for a rabbit is all about by volunteering for a group that rescues them.

Instead of giving pets as gifts, the BC SPCA suggests making your own gift certificate offering to pay the adoption fee for a pet, and wrapping up supplies like leashes and collars to go under the Christmas tree.

Anderson-Fennell is communications officer for the BC SPCA.

[cfennell@spca.bc.ca](mailto:cfennell@spca.bc.ca)

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