

Chicago Tribune  
**CHICAGOLAND**  
 HEALTH & FAMILY

*"December is an important month. We want them to all have homes for the holidays."*

— Paula Fasseaf, founder and chair of PAWS Chicago



CHRIS SWEDA/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Maggie Stuart, 9, right, and her brother, Graham, 6, sit with their new dog, Winnie, whom the family adopted just before Thanksgiving. She is the family's third dog.

## MAN'S BEST GIFT?

Giving a dog for the holidays may be good-intentioned, but the idea needs a lot of thought

BY AMANDA MARRAZZO  
 Special to the Tribune

Maggie Stuart's biggest Christmas wish came true a bit early this year.

Just before Thanksgiving, the 9-year-old's parents surprised her by adopting a 3-year-old dachshund to call her own, her mom says. It was a gift she truly wanted.

"On the day we brought her home, she said, 'I can't believe this is happening, this is too good to be true,'" said Sarah

Stuart. "She didn't think we were really going to do it before the holiday ... so she was pretty excited."

Winnie is the latest member of the Winnetka family, which also includes dad, Joe; brother, Graham, 6; and two older dogs, Gus, 11, and Otto, 7.

"I was excited," Maggie said. "The other dogs don't really pay attention to me ... I already feel closer to her. She comes on my lap and stuff, and I take her on walks, and she sort of listens to me and stuff."

Pets can be a treasured holiday present for young and old, and the supply is plentiful. But Paula Fasseaf, founder and chair of PAWS Chicago, a no-kill shelter that encourages pet adoption year-round, advises that there be some deep thought before a dog or cat is given as a Christmas gift.

A successful pet adoption requires appropriate screening by the shelter and lots of discussion on the family's part about who will care for the pet, said Fasseaf, whose operation

rescued and adopted out about 5,600 dogs and cats last year. The Stuarts went through such a screening.

If parents are adopting a puppy for younger children as a surprise Christmas present — or at any other time of the year — adoption counselors want to know information such as the ages of the children, who will be the primary caretaker of the puppy and whether the family has other pets.

The Stuarts purposely

adopted Winnie well before Dec. 25 because they will be home on vacation and will be able to help acclimate the dog to her new surroundings and the family's routine, Sarah Stuart said.

If a family has not had a pet before, PAWS Chicago provides information and education on such things as pet care, financial commitments, veterinary costs and food costs.

"We want to set them up

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CHRIS SWEDA/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Graham Stuart, left, watches his mother, Sarah, give treats to the family's three dogs. The Winnetka family adopted Winnie well before Christmas to help acclimate her.

## Dogs as gifts not always ideal

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with the right expectation, so they know what to expect and realize (if) they are really ready to take on the responsibility (of having a new dog or cat in the home)," Fasseaf said.

Sometimes a family, though good-intentioned, is not the right fit for a new dog or cat, and the animal is returned to the shelter. These can be sad, difficult times, and, depending on the household dynamics, it can be traumatic for the pet, she said.

Fasseaf recommends fostering a pet for a week to get a taste of ownership before making a full commitment to adopt.

"We just fostered a dog to a good girl, but this dog needs people around more. She can't be there for (the dog) all the time," Fasseaf said.

This can be a problem even when the dog is not being adopted as a gift. Single men in their 20s often come in to adopt a dog, only to return it later because they work and travel

too much.

"It seems glamorous, but then they can't handle the responsibility," she said. "The way the world is, people are very transient today. They move around, they travel a lot, and an animal is a very important part of the family. They need sitters, they need day care, good medical care. ... A puppy is like a child."

Giving a dog or cat as a gift to an elderly family member is a "wonderful" idea, Fasseaf said, but she wants to know that the person giving the pet also will be there if needed to support and help care for the pet.

Fasseaf said she adopted a Chihuahua that was about to be euthanized as a surprise for her mom. Because her mom is older and no longer drives, Fasseaf is committed to help care for the dog and take him to necessary vet appointments.

Fasseaf said that with proper preparation, education and pet selection, the holidays can be "a wonderful time of year" to adopt a pet.

"December is an important month," she said. "We want to see these animals in homes and not in shelters. We want them to all have homes for the holidays."

Debra Quackenbush, spokeswoman for McHenry County Animal Control and Adoption Center, also recommends a cautious approach.

She said surprising the family with a dog or cat on Christmas morning "looks sweet in the movies."

But in real life, it could be a bit tricky, she said.

She notes it may not always be a good idea to introduce a dog or cat to the home during the holidays, with all the comings and goings of guests and extra parties and festivities taking the family away from the home at a time when the new four-legged family member needs help getting settled in.

"It's not easy for a dog to adapt to a household when it is chaotic," she said.

December may not be the best time to bring in a new pet

in some situations, she said.

"Many animal bites happen at this time of year," Quackenbush said. "Even a normally calm and docile pet may become agitated enough to bite."

For the safety of the pet and visitors, consider putting a dog in a separate room when hosting a holiday party.

Other safety tips for keeping pets safe during the holidays include keeping dogs and cats away from alcohol, poinsettias, ornaments, tinsel and electrical cords, as well as turkey and chicken bones and chocolates.

The garbage should be closely monitored so pets doesn't indulge in holiday leftovers.

Also, with extra traffic in and out of the home, doors will be opening more often, offering pets more opportunities to run out.

"Pet ownership is a big responsibility and a longtime commitment," Quackenbush said. "Be sure your family is ready to adopt a pet and then decide what type, size and breed of animal would best fit in

with your family's lifestyle. The age of the child or children is equally important, as different pets are appropriate for different ages."

At the Stuart house, Winnie has made herself warm and cozy in Maggie's bedroom, where she has all her toys and her own bed.

The transition with the two other dogs has been smooth, and the young Stuarts are enjoying getting to know and care for her.

The Stuarts look forward to introducing Winnie to the rest of the family at various holiday gatherings.

"She will be a big part of the Christmas celebration," said Sarah Stuart. "She's like the greatest addition to our family. We are totally in love with her."

For information on adoption through PAWS, go to [pawschicago.org](http://pawschicago.org). For information through the McHenry County Animal Control and Adoption Center, go to [adoptapet.com](http://adoptapet.com)