

Am I Ready for a Cat?

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger discusses what to consider before adopting a cat.

By Marilyn Krieger, CCBC

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Q: At my age (younger than 13), I think I am ready for a pet. I have watched and taken care of more than 30 dogs and cats. My parents say we don't have enough money for a cat. I "live" with two outdoor cats that are actually my neighbor's. My dad hates cats and my mom says we can't get one until the outdoor cat dies because she will get mad at us for having another cat. The outdoor cat seemed to get used to the dogs we watch, so I think she can get used to a kitten. Am I ready for a cat? I want to know what breed you think would fit my lifestyle: I spend most of the day at school; I don't really want to brush a cat every day; I think that a pet will give me his heart if I give him mine.

A: I applaud your love of animals and encourage you to keep helping them. Since you obviously love animals and you want the best for them there are some points you need to consider before adopting one for yourself and your family.

Everyone in your family should want to adopt a cat. It is better for the health and happiness of both the cat and all family members when everyone is agreeable to bringing a cat into the home. From your question, it doesn't sound like your father is willing to share his home with a cat since he hates them. Currently you are still living with your family, but in a few years you will probably live away from home, go to college, travel or work elsewhere. What will happen to the cat when you leave? Who will take care of him? Taking the cat with you when you leave home could be a challenge. The majority of college situations aren't suited for pets, and it's hard to find an apartment that will accept cats. What concerns me is that after you leave home, the cat will not receive the care and attention he needs.

The costs of adopting a cat go beyond initial adoption fees, food and toys. Veterinary bills can be very expensive and, unfortunately, unexpected illnesses or accidents can occur. Cats who live outside are more prone to accidents and diseases than cats who live indoors 24/7. A broken leg or an infection can be very costly. Sometimes treatment of an injured or sick animal can cost thousands of dollars. You may have enough money to meet the everyday needs of a cat, but can you afford a couple of thousand dollars for a surgery? Even if the cat is healthy, he will need to go to the veterinarian at least once a year for checkups, and may need to have his teeth cleaned, blood work done, etc.

I encourage you to wait until you are through school and settled in a permanent location before adopting a dog or a cat. In the meantime, while you still live at home, there are lots of things you can do to help animals, while learning all about their needs and behaviors. Consider volunteering at either your local shelter or a rescue group. Most shelters have programs in place where volunteers provide TLC for the cats and dogs. Some shelters have other programs in place where you can learn about the animals while you care for them. Another option to investigate is feeding and caring for feral colonies of cats. There are networks and groups who care for feral colonies, ensuring they are healthy and cared for. I also encourage you to consider becoming a veterinarian, a veterinary technician or go into another animal-related field where you can help save and care for animals. The world needs people who are truly dedicated to the well-being of animals.