

The Right Kitten

Experiencing the empty nest syndrome? A kitten might be just what you need.

Koren Wetmore

In 2003 I turned 40 and watched my daughter leave home. I sat on her bed and wept, realizing that all too soon, I would also say farewell to my son. Already his attention had shifted toward friends, school and his life beyond our home.

Although my sadness passed, it was months before I recognized the furry heroine that helped me during this life transition. She slept with me, followed me and happily played with the toys I lavished on her. And through caring for and feeding Peaches, our 10-year-old Persian mix, I became mother to a cat.

I belong to the baby boomer generation, a group of about 80 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964. Many of us have or will soon experience what psychologists call the empty nest syndrome, feelings of grief that follow a grown child's departure from home. It can be a confusing time of both relief and loss. The stress of daily parenting routines is gone, but the house suddenly seems too empty and quiet.

In many cases, parents have been accustomed to taking care of their young for years and may long for another 'child to nurture, says Jane Rosen-Grandon, Ph.D., a North Carolina-based therapist who helps clients cope with life transitions. Pets offer perfect solutions. After all, when pets grow up, they don't leave home.

Boomer CatsBaby boomers represented nearly half of the cat owners in the American Pet Product Manufacturers Association Inc.'s (APPMA) 2003-04 National Pet Owner Survey. The survey revealed that 62 percent of cat owners view their cats as children. The sudden surge in pet-product sales which doubled from \$17 billion in 1994 to \$34.4 billion in 2004 timed out with the boomer generation's transition to the empty nest years, says APPMA COO, managing director and baby boomer Bob Vetere. These figures, along with increased sales of luxury items, such as diamond cat collars, indicate boomers see their cats as more than just pets, he says.

Pets used to be kept outdoors, somehow separate from the family. For some reason our generation (baby boomers) has taken pets in and incorporated them more and more into our lives, Vetere says. It's not that boomers are unhappy, but a pet gives couples a common connection.