

When humans run around like lunatics during the holidays in the name of family, they sometimes overlook their non-human, but no less important, family members: pets. The holiday season can be just as stressful for animals as humans, said Bastrop County Animal Control field officer Sandy Perio, and animal control tends to see an increase in surrendered or abandoned animals in December and January. A major reason for the increase, particularly in January, is the tendency for people to buy their child a puppy without thinking the decision through.

"Pets are a lot of responsibility. They depend on you for everything," said Perio. "When you decide you want a pet, you should always go into it with the understanding that it's a life-long commitment."

Unfortunately, the holiday season doesn't make a particularly good backdrop for researching pet ownership. "Parents want to put that puppy under the tree," Perio said. So they pick out a cute fluffball, pack it up and surprise their child with it on Christmas Day.

But sometimes the puppy has a few surprises for adults as well.

For one thing, puppies require an adjustment period. "Anytime you bring home a puppy you have to realize you're taking it into your house and everything there is new. And you are new," Perio said. "Puppies are naturally curious, and they will get into things." Everything in the house is fodder for a puppy. Extra holiday stuff, such as a Christmas tree, presents, decorations or visiting family or friends will not be spared the puppy's curiosity.

This can create a situation that leaves adults frustrated, said Perio. It also poses a health risk to the puppy, which can choke on ornaments, ribbons and other non-digestible items.

And the longer a puppy goes without a caretaker setting boundaries and discouraging maladaptive behaviors, the harder it will be to train the animal, she added.

Rather than buying a puppy on a whim, Perio recommends buying a stuffed animal or pet toys and putting them under the Christmas tree with a paper voucher good for one real puppy. After the holiday chaos ends, "take your child and spend time picking out an animal," she said.

Preparation requires researching breeds and making sure the animal is a good match for its prospective owner, Perio said. It also requires teaching the child how to care for a pet.

"Often the child isn't ready for the responsibility, they're not prepared," said Perio. "They don't realize what is involved in having an animal." Parents have to be ready to be actively involved in the care of the pet and consider the possibility that they may become the primary caretaker, she added.

New puppies aren't the only pets facing holiday hardships. Existing pets can also get the short end of the Yule Log.

People go on vacation, leaving their animals alone or in the care of acquaintances. Pets pick up on the stress their owners experience when hunting for gifts or preparing their homes for a family visit.

"When your household is out of whack, it's stressful for your animal too," said Perio.

Animals react to stress in a variety of ways, some of which can be disconcerting to the

pet owner – such as tearing up the house or biting an unfamiliar houseguest.

"If [the owner] didn't have a lot to do with their pet beforehand, that's usually when they're going to give them up," Perio said.

Perio recommends separating the pet from the chaos, for example keeping it in a bedroom or outside while guests are visiting and checking on it regularly. Pets should always be brought inside when the temperature gets close to freezing.

People planning vacations should plan to board their pets or place them with a familiar friend. "I'd recommend boarding first," said Perio. "Make sure if you leave them with [a friend] it's someone who is going to give your animal the same care you give them."

Bastrop County has a number of boarding houses, Perio said. But book animals in advance, because boarding houses fill up, she said.