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THE DOG - A FAMILY MEMBER AND BEST COMPANION

CASE STUDY/INSIGHT

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Perhaps dogs could be given a different title also, for a surprising number of dog owners prefer to see them, not only as their best friend but as their child or sibling - essentially as a member of the family and an important one in their life.

Imagine returning home from work at the end of the day, or after a month-long vacation, or even after a brief visit to the supermarket. The moment we step through the threshold and into our homes, we are greeted by those closest to us, our families. Our parents, probably glad to see us safe and sound. Our spouse, probably happy to have their better half beside them again. Our children, probably beaming at us with delight while working on their homework. And then, there is our dog, with just one visible reaction - excitement. It matters not how angry we may have been at them before leaving, or how long we had been gone for, or even what mood we're in upon returning. They are always, quite literally, jumping with joy just to see us come home to them, and their expressive nature is seldom subtle, yet comforting and enjoyable to behold. Dogs redefine the terms unconditional love and loyalty.

The bond between a dog and its human family is special. Although at first, the idea of adopting or buying a young dog may be centred around fun and excitement, and the anticipation levels of the owners for finally having a playful, furry companion are high; many owners end up raising the dogs as their children. This doesn't just mean feeding them and taking them to the vet but also involves a deep emotional connection that is formed, not very different from the bond that exists between parents and their offspring. For instance, dog parents get nervous when they leave their canine children alone for too long, or even in the safe hands of family and friends, if the need to travel arises; when the dog gets sick or doesn't eat his/her food, their human parent gets worried and gives them the extra attention they need.

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This emotional connection, however, works both ways. The reverse may often prove to be more powerful. In other words, dogs remain loyal and forever grateful to their human families and shower them with love and affection, no strings attached. They are filled with such positive emotions almost all the time that they act as wonderful stress relievers and by spending merely a few minutes with them, we are filled with such joy that we tend to forget our troubles and difficulties. Apart from being extremely caring, they are also very intelligent. When the dog's human parent is sick, they immediately sense this and not only refrain from approaching them, be it for their food, water or daily walks, but almost certainly remain by their side for comfort. Not to take anything away from the bond that humans share with their spouse or children, but it is safe to say that this kind of positivity that reverberates from dogs and the lack of negative emotions such as greed and ego, makes them unique in their way, setting them aside from all other pets and even humans.



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Any parent raising a child would say that there are times of stress involved in parenting - tending to babies, feeding kids, choosing a school, helping teenagers with their homework, seeing them go off to college and grow into successful adults and so on. On the other hand, raising a dog can be considered stress-free in this regard and what's more is that dogs stay obedient their whole lives, which means there are no phases when they become rebellious or short-tempered. Of course, there are certain challenges associated with raising dogs such as training them and protecting our furniture and personal possessions from their childish wraths in their initial stages as pups, or finding a suitable caretaker, when we are out of the station. However, dogs are not only intelligent but also understandable. They can read our temperatures, understand our moods and often act accordingly. Even if we happen to be in a foul mood and therefore push them aside, they stick with us and return to our arms with the same amount of joy and compassion, no matter how long it takes. It is almost as if these beloved creatures put their family's happiness first and are often so protective, that they hardly allow intruders or even known associates, including family and friends to harm them. It's no surprise how service dogs that are adopted by families with special needs do such an incredible job in assisting them and making their lives better.



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Many are so intelligent that they can detect ailments and call for help, or even provide first aid in some cases, thereby saving the lives of their loved ones.

Apart from all the physical and psychological support they provide, there is one important human attribute that families who raise dogs as their kid unknowingly build on – empathy. The journey of caring and nurturing those enables humans to truly understand the difficulties and suffering these animals could be going through, particularly in the case of ones that were abandoned by their families and strays who roam about our streets. The question that often springs to mind is – we take such good care of our pet children with the affection they deserve, but what about the ones that don't have a family (anymore)? The realization that there are many friendly canines out there deprived of the one thing they might be craving for, love, enables us to sympathize with animals' lives and therefore grow into a more caring and considerate society.

