

BY DEBBIE LAVDAS



Pets, please!

The joy of raising animals can start in the early years.

With April comes spring, with spring comes bunnies, and with bunnies comes, "Mom, can I have a rabbit? How 'bout a cat? A dog? A guinea pig?"

You get the idea. A few weeks before Easter two years ago, we were staying at the Montage in Laguna Beach, which is hopping with wild bunnies. "They're so cute!" was all I heard the whole weekend, and the quest to break Mom down began. Apparently the Easter Bunny was on my kids' side, as the following Sunday they awoke to find a trail of carrots leading them to their surprise gift: a sweet little Lionhead bunny.

Bun Bun is our longhair rabbit; like a cat (or lion), he's one feisty guy. He plays like a puppy, charges, gives love bites, is litter-trained and runs free in half our house. The kids let him nibble their feet. I put him on their beds for wake-up calls. He's also besties with our gentle-giant Lab.

Some moms think I'm crazy owning a bunny, Lab, two finches and three cats (now in catnip heaven), but I'm a firm believer that animals teach intrinsic kindness that humans cannot. Plus they offer unconditional companionship. I've had animals in the house since the kids were babies because I too grew up with animals.

It's sad to me when kids come over who are scared of our small zoo. Nine times out of 10 it's a child who doesn't have an animal, so it makes

sense – but it's still sad. The kids (and sometimes their moms) want me to put away the animals, but I can't; our furry ones are part of our family. So our goofy Lab gobble some kids' pizza at a birthday party or licks little ones. It is what it is; you take the good with the bad.

If your kids are on a mission to break you down, I say give in – the sooner, the better. Animals are healers, companions and playmates. Sure, there's mess, and yes, I have hay all over my travertine floors, a ridiculous amount of dog hair on my exotic African sapele hardwoods. My baseboards have bunny bite marks, and I have birdseed splattered about. But we clean, vacuum, patch and paint, and the kids have sweet, wonderful childhood memories for life.

Although a house is a place of material items, a HOME is a lived-in, imperfect, warm environment that is awesome to return to when greeted by a loveable Labrador, an awaiting bunny or a curious cat – and perhaps a reptile or feathered friend.

This spring, hatch a plan to visit an animal shelter, and see what pets catch your eye or tug at your heartstrings. And once you take one home, commit to the ownership. They are family members now. [OCF](#)

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Furry friends

Did you know ...

- Children who grow up in homes with pets have less risk of developing common allergies and asthma.
- Emerging readers often feel more comfortable reading aloud to a pet.
- Kids with pets get outside more – to go for walks, run and play – and enjoy all the associated health benefits.
- Nurturing a pet is an acceptable way for boys to "parent play" – to practice being caregivers.
- Feeding and caring for a pet encourages childhood responsibility.
- Children with pets display improved impulse control, social skills and self-esteem.
- Sharing the love and care of a family pet forges an additional common bond among siblings.
- Cuddling a pet reduces stress, loneliness and anxiety.

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