puppy
A LOVE STORY

My daughter spent years trying to convince me that we needed a dog. Turns out all of her research was right.

By Michele Shapiro
Photographs by Michael Brian

The other day as I sped through the aisles of Costco, filling my cart with containers and cartons too large for my regular-size apartment, I tossed in a seven-pound bag of chicken thighs just for the puppy.

Yes, I am one of those dog owners who swore she would feed her pet only dry food, then after the first few months succumbed to wet and, ultimately, to table scraps. Now our 1-year-old tricolor Cavalier King Charles spaniel waits for me to pop some chicken into the microwave. At mealtimes, I sometimes fix one dish for my husband and me, another for my daughter, and a third for the pooch.

Buying a dog was not my idea. Or my husband Eric's for that matter. It was the brainchild of my 10-year-old daughter, Esmé. Actually, to say the dog was her "idea" is a gross understatement. It was a mission she was on for more than three years, or more than one third of her young life.

It all started with the dog-breed place mat that I innocently bought her one summer day early in her fourth year. Before long, she had memorized all the breeds whose adorable photos hid beneath a layer of laminate and, over time, random drops of milk and gobs of cheddar-cheese sauce.



Are you ready to commit? On average, dog ownership costs $1,600 a year.

Then came the books. While most children her age checked out *Curious George* and *Where the Wild Things Are* from the library, Esmé insisted on thick tomes containing information on every imaginable breed of dog, which she researched with the intensity of a Ph.D. candidate: Which dogs are best suited for apartment living? Which are good with young kids? Which bark, growl, and shed the least? Which are the smartest, the kindest, the calmest? Which have Tootsie Roll–size poops and which ones pee on wee-wee pads rather than on your rugs? Her lists were longer than my weekly to-dos.

"When are we going to get our dog?" she'd ask eagerly, in advance of any birthday, holiday, or other possible present-receiving boldfaced day on the calendar.

If you want to know the truth, I thought I'd never own one. As a kid, I'd had a few. But our raised ranch, perched above a main drag, wasn't conducive to pet ownership, and our pets always met the same fate: darting out the screen door, across the perfectly square lawn, and into the oncoming car traffic. The only dog that escaped that end was a wire fox terrier named Lucky. Just a few weeks after my parents got him when I was around 5—long before the days of microchips—he was dognapped after he ran out the screen door and up the street. My older sister and I typed up fliers and posted them around the neighborhood. But no one called to say they had found our puppy. We saw him a few days later at the local shopping center. He tugged at his leash, but his new owner quickly escorted him in the opposite direction. We felt helpless.

After the first few times Esmé pleaded for a dog to call her own, I was prepared: I'd stand on my tiptoes and automatically grab an excuse from the top shelf of my brain where I stored them in neat little rows. "When you're old enough to walk it yourself," I'd say, thinking that day would never come. Or "When I get a job where I can work from home, because we can't very well leave a puppy by itself all day while you're at school and Daddy and I are at work, right?"

Logically, Esmé knew the answer to my question. But she refused to let it lie.

"We can pay somebody to watch it," she argued, her eyebrows arching beneath a row of bangs. She had a response for every excuse.

Every time we took a walk around our neighborhood, I'd have to build in extra minutes so Esmé could stop and pet each dog she saw. She'd often impress the owners with her knowledge, saying something like, "That's a bearded collie, right?" and, after looking a little taken aback, they'd respond with, "Yes, that's correct. Not many people know that." She seemed happy just being a "dog-spert" and foster petter for a while. But inevitably, the urge to own a pup of her own kicked up—like an upset stomach after one too many chocolates. Undaunted, she'd return to her books and lists in the hope of finding a breed that would win my heart and change my mind, and I knew that I'd eventually have to think up some new reasons that would outfox her once and for all.

Then one night a few months back, Esmé, an only child—who had time for or could afford a second?—gave me an ultimatum. "Mom," she said, "either you need to get a baby brother or sister for me, or we need to get a dog."

At 45, I knew the little sibling wasn't a viable option, at least not for me. But I sensed at that moment that Esmé felt something was missing in her life. And maybe it was. For all of us. We were a bit like a table without a fourth leg. Per-

The Ruff Guide to the Right Dog

If you make the big decision to get a pup, picking one that goes with your family and lifestyle is key. Talk to a vet or a local trainer about what dog is best for your family. Use our chart as a starting point. Then go to **parents.com/pets** to talk with other pet-owner moms.

BIG YARD



Larger sporting breeds like golden retrievers and Labradors and working dogs such as Bernese mountain dogs and Siberian huskies are at their happiest running around the yard with the kids. Herding dogs such as collies and terriers are also good for active families, but they require a commitment to stimulation and activity or else they can sometimes become frustrated and destructive.

SMALL HOUSE



Medium-size pups such as basset hounds and bulldogs won't go crazy sharing close quarters with a rowdy family. Lap dogs like a shih tzu or papillon are good choices too. But watch them around young children: A larger dog may not mind if a toddler climbs all over him, but small dogs get scared of being stepped on or having their tail pulled, and they can get snappy if kids roughhouse.

BABIES



Breeds that socialize well, aren't too skittish, and won't be freaked out by a wailing infant, such as retrievers, setters, and hounds, are usually great around tiny tots. Even the most low-maintenance dogs require attention, so make sure you're not taking on too much with a baby. If you really do have time for a pooch between diaper duty and all-nighters, consider an adult dog that is known to do well with kids.

ALLERGIES



Breeds that produce minimal dander, like poodles, bichons frises, and Portuguese water dogs will cut down on the sneezing. But no dog—not even ones like labradoodles that have been specially bred to be allergen-free—can deliver 100 percent on that promise. Keep problems at bay by washing and grooming the dog frequently, and making sure the allergic person's bedroom is considered a pet-free zone.

FROM TOP: ISTOCKPHOTO (3); JUPITERIMAGES.



haps a puppy would steady us. It was in that softened frame of mind that I came across a photo of an overly cute Blenheim Cavalier King Charles spaniel—a breed that had always made it onto Esmé's top-five list—while surfing around on the Internet. His breeder was listed in Paterson, New Jersey.

"Where's Paterson?" I asked my husband.

"Just over the George Washington Bridge. Thirty minutes away." He looked at the photo of the adorable purebred. "Do you want to take a drive to look at him?"

"Oh, please, please, please, Mom," Esmé chimed in.

"Why not have a look?" my husband said helpfully. "You're working from home now. It can keep you company."

Two against one.

In less than an hour, we pulled up to a small, square house with worn carpets and a nice couple with two teenage girls, and four hours later, we returned home with a new dog. It wasn't the one whose photo I'd spied online. That one had turned out to be painfully shy, which is probably why he hadn't sold yet even though he was nearly 6 months old. We spent close to an hour watching him piddle on the floor and trying to bond with him. But we weren't getting anywhere. So my husband asked the breeder if he happened to have another dog that would help bring the shy little puppy out of his shell so we could get a better sense of his personality.

He came back with a tiny tricolored Cavalier, who immediately jumped up and licked the shy dog's face. This Cavalier was like a yo-yo with fur. Esmé and I looked at each other. "We want that one." We left the shy guy.

On that short ride back to the city, we tossed around names for our new puppy. Was he a Max? Or more of a Zach? A possible Scotty? We somehow settled on Ringo, my favorite Beatle, and both Esmé and Ringo were asleep by the time we pulled up in front of our apartment building.

Esmé loves to walk Ringo. We don't let her do it alone yet, but she's good at wrapping the leash around her wrist a few times and proudly parading him up and down the street. We can't walk more than a few steps without people stopping us to pet the dog and say how cute he is.

Has he peed on the carpet? I wish I could say no, but I'd be lying. Has he kept us up with his crying and barking? Once or twice. Or maybe three times. But he's easy to forgive. Ringo fills a need in all of us: To Esmé, he's the younger brother she never had. To Eric and me, he's like a loving son who climbs into his crate when we tell him to and rarely barks back.

Already we look at the photo of him in Esmé's arms on the day we brought him home, a tiny ball of black-and-white fur with a brown stripe down the center of his forehead and tiny ears. I see Esmé's beaming face, and I know that she was right all along. ▢

VISIT US! Having trouble picking a name for your pooch? Check out **parents.com/dogname** for an A-to-Z guide.

Doggie Decisions: Where to Look

* Shelter *

Plan on investing time in the adoption process. Most shelter dogs are mutts, who make great family pets. But get to know the animal by spending time hanging out and asking about the dog's background. A good shelter wants to make a great pet-family match too, so look for someplace that asks you questions and seems to care about whether it works out.

* Breeder *

If your kids are pining for a puppy and you're willing to spend the money, a breeder might be the way to go. While purebred dogs often have more health problems than mixed breeds, being able to meet the pup's mom and dad allows you to get an idea of the potential personality of your new pet and find out what genetic diseases may affect your dog down the line.

* Pet Stores *

Those squirmy balls of fluff in a window may be irresistible, but it's best to stick to shelters, rescue groups, and breeders. Pet stores sometimes get their dogs from puppy mills, where the animals aren't well cared for. Most don't screen customers, so responsible breeders who want to be certain that their animals go to the right home won't sell to them.