

Should I get a dog?

Most people reading this magazine will already have a dog at their feet or on their lap, but some will be dog lovers that haven't yet taken the plunge. Here's an honest look at what it really means to be a dog guardian...

It's a beautiful sunny afternoon, you are walking through the park, and an adorable puppy comes tumbling into view. Or you are sitting comfortably on the sofa and the face of a loveable, dependable hound pops up on your TV. Suddenly, the question lands: should I get a dog?

Inviting a dog into your home, your heart and your life means more than just playtime and companionship. It means making a commitment to a living being who depends on you for everything, from basic, fundamental requirements to emotional well-being. It's about showing up for the joyful parts *and* the messy ones. It's about being the kind of person who gives a dog the life they deserve.

Before you run out and buy a bed, harness and a multitude of toys, take a breath. This article is here to help you reflect deeply – and honestly – on whether now is the right time, and whether you are truly ready to step up to become a dog guardian.

DO YOU HAVE THE TIME?

Dogs are not part-time companions. Your daily schedule needs to allow for exercise and mental stimulation (walks, play and thinking games), training sessions (short, positive, daily interactions), rest and companionship (your presence matters), and routine care (feeding, brushing, poop-scooping and health checks).

Young puppies require near-constant supervision. They do not arrive toilet trained and they *will* eat dangerous, inappropriate things, literally in the blink of an eye (see our 'What dog should I get?' article coming in the near future). Adult

dogs need daily attention that amounts to more than just a quick morning walk. If your job, lifestyle, preferences or travel schedule don't allow for this, or if you're not ready or able to make changes to accommodate these requirements, it might be worth hitting pause.

CAN YOU AFFORD A DOG?

The cost of dog ownership can surprise many first-time guardians. Beyond the initial set-up, there are ongoing and sometimes unpredictable expenses. Estimating accurate costs is incredibly difficult, as even something as simple as dog food can have wildly different financial implications. It is a bit like asking, "How much does it cost to raise a child?" Estimates range from £6,000 to £85,000 for a dog's lifetime! But the things that you need to factor in are:

- Food
- Veterinary care (routine care/accidents/chronic conditions)
- Pet insurance
- Grooming
- Training
- Enrichment
- Dog walkers or day care
- Kennels or a live-in sitter when you travel
- Possible behavioural support

Being financially prepared is key to responsible ownership.

Do your own reliable research into these costs, as they also vary depending on where you are.

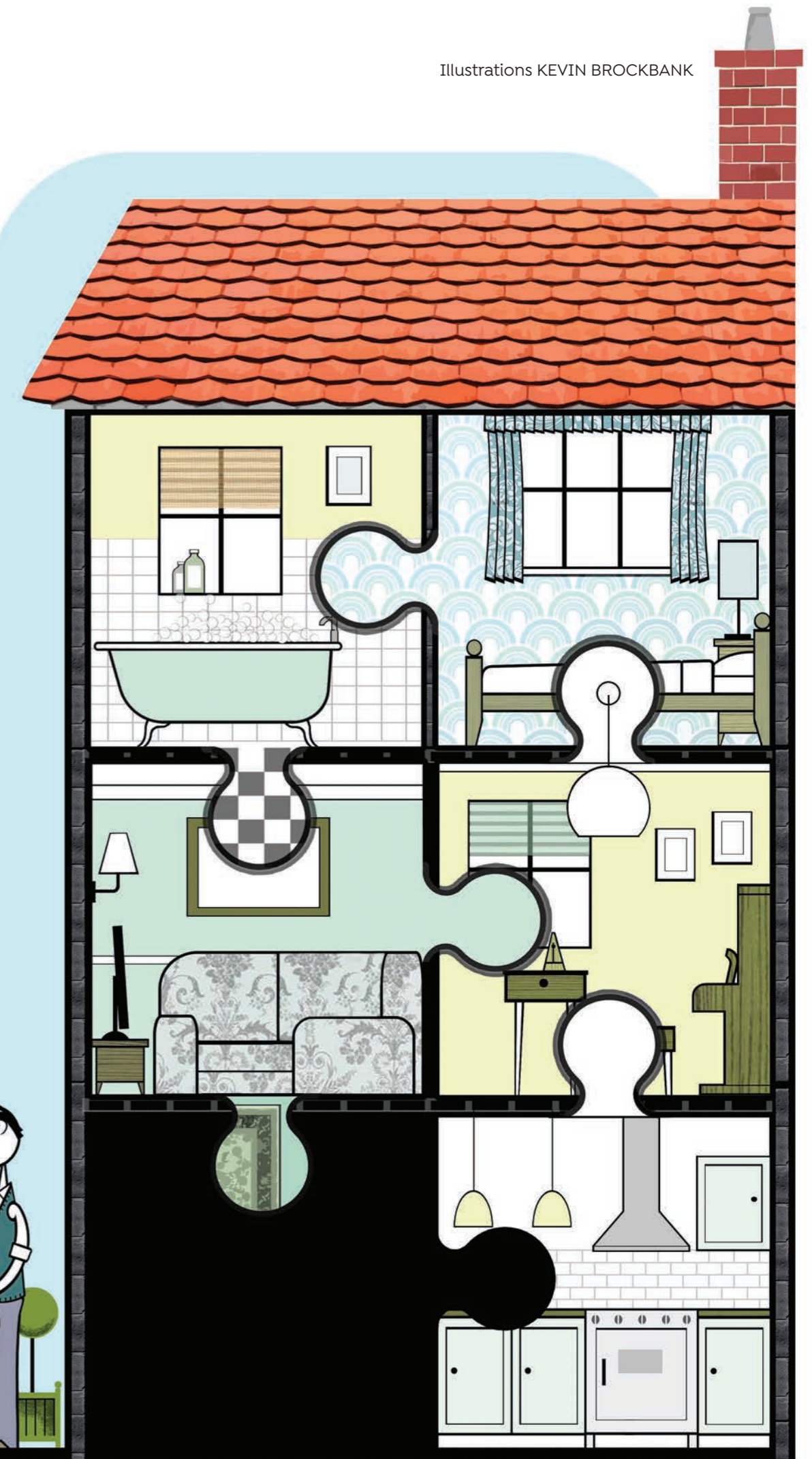
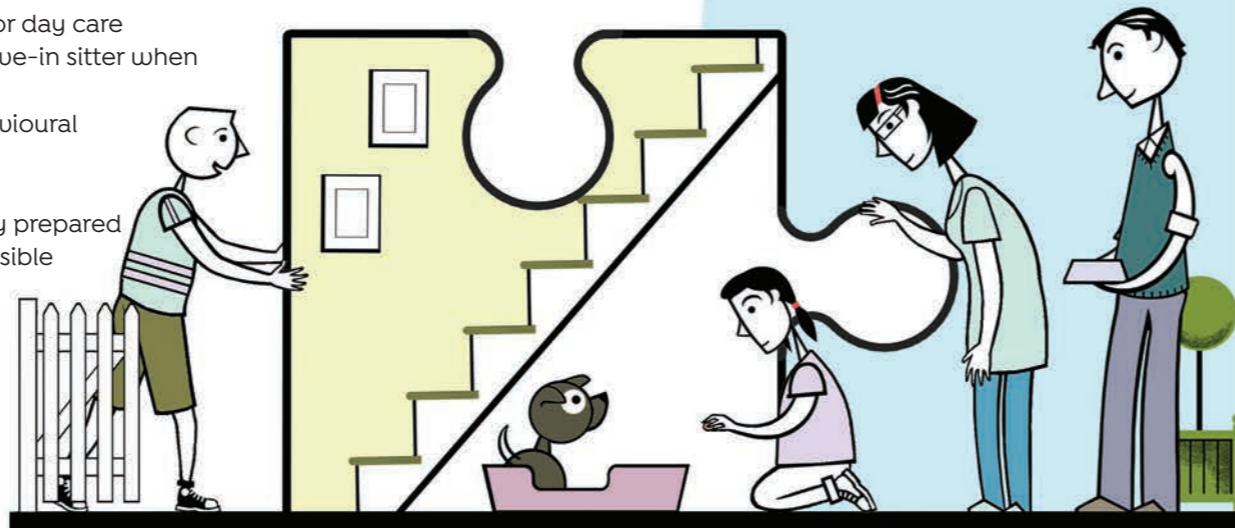
ARE YOU EMOTIONALLY READY?

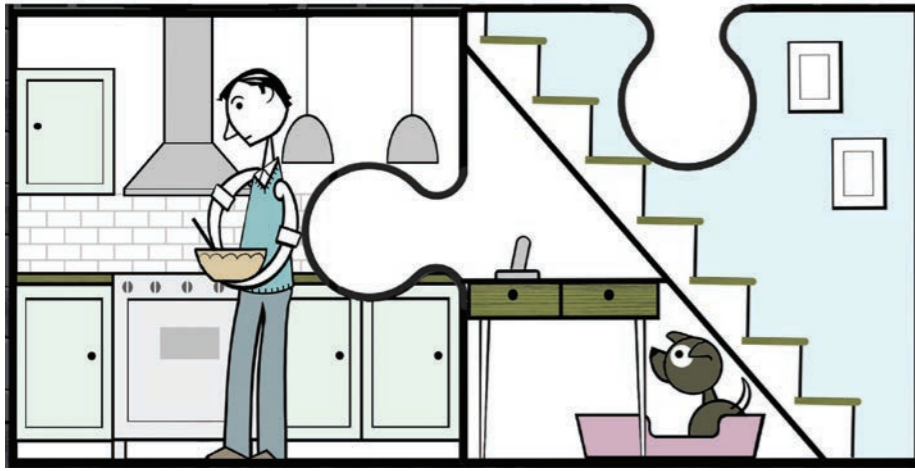
Dogs are emotionally complex, highly intelligent animals. They bond deeply and they feel a range of emotions including stress, fear, excitement, confusion and joy.

As their guardian, you have a responsibility to be able to read and respond to their body language, and know how to support them during fear periods, health issues, or behavioural challenges. Dogs don't come pre-programmed to automatically fit into your lifestyle. Your relationship will require empathy, flexibility and patience.

A sad but true fact of dog ownership is that their life expectancy is often not more than 15 years – and, in many breeds, considerably less – and they will probably leave this life before you. It will be down to you (with support from professionals) to make tough, selfless decisions with only the best interests of your companion at heart.

(I am actually crying just writing this! Dogs hurt!) >





Some dogs will slot into busy, vibrant households quickly and easily – others will not

IS YOUR ENVIRONMENT DOG-APPROPRIATE?

You don't necessarily need a huge garden or a countryside retreat to give a dog a great life. What matters more is how you use your space and time.

That said, you do need to consider if your home is dog-safe (no toxic plants, chewable wires, or open staircases). Are you allowed to have a dog? Check landlord or lease agreements, and other family members' opinions. Are there safe, accessible outdoor spaces for walks and exploration? Are your neighbours tolerant of barking or occasional excitement?

Dogs are able to adjust to your environment, but you will need to proactively set them up for success if you want them to adapt. Remember – not all dogs are equal. Some will slot into busy, vibrant households quickly and easily – others will not. Some can be left home alone for a couple of hours. Others cannot.

ARE YOU COMMITTED TO FORCE-FREE, ETHICAL TRAINING?

Ethical training isn't optional – it's essential. Force-free training methods are built on the science of how animals learn. They focus on reinforcing the behaviours you want, rather than punishing the ones you don't. The goal is to build a bond based on trust, communication and understanding.

Dogs don't misbehave to annoy you. They can only communicate through their behaviour, and it's our

job to listen, and to teach and guide them with kindness and compassion. A well-behaved dog is not a frightened or tired dog. It's a secure, confident dog whose physical and emotional needs are met, who understands what is expected and who trusts their human.

Many people find that despite their best intentions, research and planning, they do not end up with the dog they were expecting. Some may need help to overcome emotional upset (which may come from either their history or their genetics). Sometimes, that dog you thought would be your running partner might not be able to go for long runs due to health concerns, or the dog you wanted to join you in cafes might be afraid of busy places. Are you ready to either work on or accept these things?

ARE YOU PREPARED FOR A LONG-TERM COMMITMENT?

This is not a short chapter in your life. Dogs live, on average, 10 to 15 years or beyond. In that time, your own life might change beyond all recognition. You might move to a new house or country, switch careers, start a family, or face illness. Your dog will still be there, depending on you for walks, meals, playtime and vet care. Can you see yourself honouring that commitment, through every phase of their lives – from puppy toilet accidents, adolescent chaos, adult steadiness, and eventually senior and end-of-life care?

You need to take them into

MEET THE PRACTITIONERS...



KELLY OLDAKER

After growing up in England, Kelly has spent the last 12 years in South Africa, working as a field guide, taking clients on ethical Big 5 photographic safaris. After gaining an exceptional understanding of wildlife behaviour, she is now a Coape-qualified behaviour consultant, registered with Pets Professional Guild and UK Dog Behaviour and Training charter.

Kelly runs Animal Affect (www.animalaffect.com) regularly helping dog guardians all over the world to understand and support their companions with kindness and empathy. In her spare time, she works with local communities in South Africa to improve understanding of compassion and respect for animals.

consideration – all the time. Where will they go if you go on holiday? Is it too hot to walk them at the normal time today? If your neighbours have a party, will they be letting off fireworks? Did you put the chicken away, so it doesn't get stolen off the worktop? Did the builders close the back gate properly?

DO YOU KNOW WHAT SUPPORT YOU MIGHT NEED?

No one gets it right from day one. You will need a network of professionals, friends and community resources. Research vet clinics near you and their emergency procedures; certified, force-free trainers, either in your area or via online support; dog

walkers or daycare for busy days; local pet stores or enrichment suppliers; trusted friends or family who can help in emergencies.

Planning ahead means you can confidently respond when challenges arise – because they will.

Something many people forget about is making a plan for your dog should something serious happen to you. I now strongly suggest that people have an official discussion with a specific person who will formally agree to take over responsibility of their dog in the worst-case scenario. Don't just assume that someone else will step up. The responsibility is yours to ensure that provisions have been properly made.

RESPONSIBLE GUARDIANSHIP IN A NUTSHELL

This isn't about perfection – it's about commitment. Being a responsible guardian means continuing to learn, being willing to adapt, and always prioritising your dog's welfare. Still unsure? That's not a bad thing. Pausing to reflect now

can prevent heartbreak later, for both you and a dog.

Here's a quick checklist that might help with clarity:

- Do I have at least one to two hours per day to devote to a dog?
- Am I financially prepared for routine and unexpected expenses?
- Am I committed to force-free, positive training methods?
- Am I emotionally ready to be a consistent, caring presence?
- Am I prepared to adapt my routine and lifestyle for a dog?
- Am I in this for the long haul, whatever life throws at me?

If you answer 'yes' to all of these questions, then it might be time for you to get a dog. If you're unsure on one or more points, that's OK. The right time might be further down the road. There's no rush – dogs deserve your best.

On a personal note, despite the fact that I can answer 'yes' to all of these questions, I do not have a dog. I am not currently prepared to take on that responsibility. Instead, I

help clients to build relationships with their dogs, spend time with friends' dogs and volunteer with a local charity. Plenty of love, fun, dog time and wet noses without the commitment. Just because you love dogs, it doesn't mean you need to have your own. My time will come, as will yours.

THE JOY IS IN THE JOURNEY

At its best, living with a dog is a partnership. A dance between two species learning each other's rhythms, habits, quirks and joys. It's a process that humbles you, while teaching patience, kindness and empathy, and will remind you to slow down and just enjoy the moment. A dog will change your life. They'll leave hair on your floor and paw prints on your heart. But you must be ready to meet them halfway—with respect, care and unwavering commitment.

So, should you get a dog? Only you can answer that question, but we hope this guide will help you do so with your heart and eyes wide open. ☐



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