



RESPONSIBILITIES... TO DOGS AND PEOPLE

Objective: Students consider the broader impact of being an effective pack leader. This further develops their capacity for empathy and their sense of social and civic membership and responsibility.

Maybe dogs can't vote, but they're citizens of their communities just the same, with rights and responsibilities unique to their species that only their human companions can help them realize.

First of all, as your dog's best friend, it's your responsibility to make sure he does not contribute to the heart-breaking and costly problem of pet overpopulation. Each year, six to eight million homeless animals wind up in animal shelters across the country; tragically, there are far too few permanent homes for all these animals. Estimates vary, but most humane organizations suggest that three to four million dogs and cats are euthanized in shelters every year, primarily for lack of suitable homes. No one knows how many more are abandoned to live and die on the street. Public

shelters spend about \$2 billion in tax money each year to care for, adopt, and euthanize unwanted pets, and that does not include the cost to communities for damage and disease caused by stray and roaming dogs and cats.

It's a huge problem with a simple answer: spay/neuter. Spaying or neutering our pets greatly reduces the number of puppies and kittens born without permanent homes. It saves lives, prevents pain and misery, and makes our animal companions healthier, happier members of our packs and our communities. It also saves municipalities millions of dollars that can be allocated toward solving other social problems.

As your dog's guardian, you have an array of important responsibilities to make sure your dog measures up as a good canine citizen. For one thing, pick up after your dog; no one wants to smell or step in his mess. Also, train your dog; a well-behaved dog under the control of a calm-assertive pack leader is a good neighbor and a welcome addition to any community. Keep your dog healthy with regular visits to your veterinarian; this includes making sure he's up to date on vaccinations. These steps not only safeguard your dog's health, they also prevent the spread of serious illnesses to other dogs in your town.

Knowing and obeying local pet laws is an important way to earn you and your dog respect. First, be aware of how your dog acts around other people and animals. If your dog is a good candidate for socializing, check out your town's rules for dogs at parks and other public sites. Many towns have regulations about where and when dogs are allowed outside without a leash. Some parks allow leashed- dogs only, while others have set aside special areas where dogs can play off-leash. Some parks allow dogs during certain months of the year or certain hours of the day. And nowadays, many communities are creating dog parks where people and dogs can socialize in their own designated space. If your community doesn't have a dog park, become an advocate for all your town's canines and work with your neighbors and civic leaders to establish one.

Most towns require that you register your dog. This is a simple, inexpensive procedure that protects the community and is also helpful if your dog gets lost. Hang your dog's registration tag on his collar, which he should wear at all times, to provide crucial information on how to get him home should he manage to wander off. Also consider microchipping your dog as another layer of identification. Collars, registration tags, and microchipping can help reunite you and your dog, saving him from becoming just another nameless stray in an overcrowded shelter.

If your family is thinking about getting a dog, remember this slogan: Adopt, Don't Shop. Adopting a shelter dog not only saves the life of your new pack member, but also makes space for another dog to get a second chance. As a bonus, shelters sometimes spay or neuter new pets for free or for a minimal fee.

If you can't adopt a dog yourself, there are still great ways to help shelter dogs. Begin by spreading the word about them. Shelter dogs are good dogs, and rescuing one is a tremendously satisfying experience. Also, urge shelters to keep pets until they find homes for them. Many private shelters are becoming "no-kill," meaning they keep all adoptable dogs and cats until they find homes. It's a difficult task because of space constraints; more pets need homes than there is space in the shelters. Another thing: Ask your shelter if it has a volunteer program. Volunteers do everything from walking dogs and socializing cats to conducting fundraising, providing everyone who cares with a chance to make a difference to the animals and to the community.