

# The Birthday Beagle

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Today is the beagle's first birthday. If you had any idea how close the beagle came to being boiled in oil this year, you'd understand the magnitude his birthday has at our house. We bought him a mailman-shaped peanut-butter cookie to celebrate.

I read somewhere that dog ownership is an approximate investment of \$80,000 over the course of a dog's life. I was determined to track how much the first year cost: Dog, \$100. Dogfood, \$6.99 per week for 52 weeks, \$363.48. Initial veterinary visit, with shots, \$100. Intestinal obstruction surgery with neutering, \$800. Dog license, \$8. Various dog toys, treats and supplies, \$300. Replacement socks and underwear for family, \$200. Home repair and replacement home furnishings: \$500. Useless Puppy Kindergarten classes, \$150. Puppy boarding during family vacations, \$250. The first year cost over \$2,700, which while high, made me feel better because if Fletcher lives for ten years at \$2,700 per year, that's only \$27,000, or \$4.50 a day, still \$53,000 less than the article estimated.

When Fletcher came home at six weeks old, he was adorable, extremely timid and conveniently portable. True, he threw up on me in the car on the way home, and I should have seen this as an omen. But when the little guy looked up at me with his pathetic brown eyes and big floppy lips, with his soft tail thup-thup-thumping against the floor, he didn't look like the kind of dog who'd eat wallpaper from both the upstairs and downstairs bathrooms. "We'll feed him!" the children begged, "We'll walk him every day! We'll clean up when he eats the garbage!" We were foolhardy to believe the children. We were more foolhardy not to have read *The Intelligence of Dogs*, by Stanley Coren, which ranks beagles 125th in intelligence, out of 133 breeds.

Our first day with Fletcher (named after a ridiculous character in a Chevy Chase movie), we went to Pet Supplies Plus and bought something called a "Puppy Starter Kit" which included a food dish, a water dish, a dog toy, a leash, and a book called "Your New Puppy." The lady at the counter smiled and said, "Aw, what kind of puppy did you get?"

"A beagle," my husband proudly announced.

The cashier, with an “I Love Pets” pin on her apron, narrowed her eyes. “Did he come with a money-back guarantee?”

We soon understood why she asked. He didn’t act much like Snoopy. Fletcher wasn’t solely as dumb as a sack of wet mice, he also ate everything: garbage, shoes, socks, computer peripherals, telephones, CD’s, briefcases, curtains, pillows, toys, clothes, books, our honeymoon trip video, and countless rolls of toilet paper. “I can’t handle this little monster anymore,” I told my family, but backed off when I saw their sad faces. Months later, our veterinarian said that Fletcher had an intestinal obstruction requiring corrective surgery. “Would you like to guess what we just pulled out of your dog?” they asked, calling us after the operation. We should have won a discount on our \$800 vet bill for correctly guessing it was a child’s sock, but no luck. We asked the vet to install a zipper rather than sew him up, seeing as there will undoubtedly be a next time. We have since applied for pet insurance, but we’re worried that being a beagle qualifies as a pre-existing condition.

We haven’t had company at our house since the beagle arrived last April. Between the kids and the dog, it’s impossible to get the house into any shape where I feel good about having it seen by people. I developed a mathematical equation to explain my plight: the rate at which two children mess up a house is inversely proportionate to the rate at which a full-time working mother can clean it, and the rate at which a beagle messes up a house is twice the rate at which the children mess it up, therefore four times the rate a full-time working mother can clean it. So, we have one of those houses that’s really cluttered, but where people love each other and everyone’s generally happy and well-adjusted. That’s what I remind myself to keep from feeling guilty about the house. Sometimes it even works.

Even an unintelligent dog trains people pretty well. Fletcher was supposed to sleep in the downstairs bathroom, but he sleeps under our covers, my own personal foot-warmer. Fletcher was supposed to stay off the furniture, but now cuddles against my legs when I’m curled up with a book on the couch. Somehow, he’s carved his own place in our family. And despite my love-hate relationship with the dog, I’m somehow his favorite.

When kids are demanding and my husband works late, it’s nice to have one creature in the house that appreciates my presence, listens for danger, doesn’t complain about homework or refuse to eat dinner. Sure, he might soil the rug, but he acts really sorry. When you consider the average amount of puppy kisses I receive on any given day is around 100, and we’re spending \$4.50 per day to keep him, that’s

really only four and a half cents to pay for each puppy kiss. And that's not too bad. Happy birthday, little beagle...I guess we're keeping you.