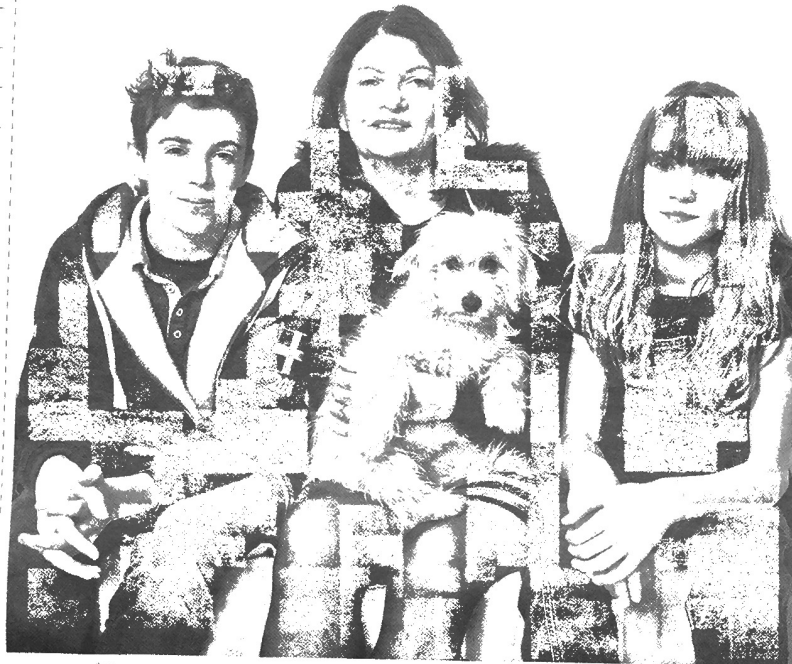


How a rescue dog saved our family

We were always arguing. Adopting a stray puppy has brought harmony into our lives, says Kate Morris

DAVID SANDISON FOR THE TIMES



Kate Morris with her children, Jude and Belle, and their rescue dog, Ava

We simply didn't want the sweet innocent puppy to bear witness to our family meltdowns. If we do raise our voices, she looks at us in a bewildered and slightly alarmed fashion and we have to stop.

As my husband and son were away, Belle and I spent the first weekend with Ava sitting between us or on us. We took her out for short walks. We cuddled her and were united in our wish to make her welcome. It was a magical few days.

Tara Saglio, a therapist, says that we could all benefit from having a pet, particularly a dog. "They are faithful, loving, loyal and warm to the touch," she says. "People underestimate the healing power of a warm cuddle with a dog, which is very nurturing and healing. After a hard day at work or school it's great to have a nonjudgmental companion."

We now walk the dog together at the weekends; before, we couldn't get our children to go for a walk, even with bribes. While walking the dog with Belle, my husband and I have had time to have normal conversations, rather than the usual shouting up the stairs trying to get her to come down

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from her bedroom, or tidy up her room, or do her homework.

Jude has offered to babysit her and walk her too. He is charmed by her, as we all are. She sits between us on the sofa in the evening, and we are all besotted. In fact we are generally in better moods and I am fitter from walking the dog twice or even three times a day. I am not naive enough to think that having Ava will solve all our problems and we will live happily ever after, but she has certainly brought some joy into our lives.

I have witnessed the kindness of strangers in the dog community. When you have a dog there is a code, which means you can smile and chat to other dog owners. When Ava rolled in fox poo a dog-owner went to her car and gave me a towel and told me to keep it. I have struck up conversations with numerous people who know the name of my dog but not mine. I have walked around the park with a handsome stranger just because our dogs are playing.

My husband, who had always said he would have nothing to do with the dog, is out this minute with her. He seems less stressed around her. The other day he walked two miles with her to the "posh" butchers to get her a bone and next weekend we are going to a dog birthday party.

The cats are tolerating her, just. The tabby battered her on the nose at the very first opportunity, the smaller one lived upstairs for two weeks, but they are all now mucking along, although I no longer have time to play with the cats. Too much walking to do.

wildatheartfoundation.org

If we don't get a dog my childhood will be ruined." These were the ominous words uttered by my 12-year-old daughter, Belle, a year ago, followed by "and if you don't do it now, it will be too late". She had been campaigning to get a dog since she was five — six long years of lobbying. Sometimes she would broach the subject twice or even three times a day. I began to dread the question and was tired of hearing myself making up vague excuses, such as "perhaps if we ever move to the country". Or "maybe if we ever get a house with a garden bigger than a sandwich and, most importantly, what about the cats?"

She was right, however. It was now or never and I didn't want to be blamed for her deprived childhood. Soon she would be off to parties and festivals, forever resenting me as the mother who denied her the one thing she wanted when she was young. Our family needed something to change. Maybe a dog would be that catalyst.

Belle was always glued to her mobile — Snapchatting, Instagramming and taking selfies — and our 15-year-old son, Jude, had metamorphosed from a sweet malleable boy into a clever argumentative adolescent, with strident opinions that clashed with his parents'. Of course, he could still be charming and funny, but often he was like Kevin from the Harry Enfield sketch, no longer willing to listen to us and pointing out that we were wrong about absolutely everything.

Family mealtimes were a minefield of arguments, the children desperate to get back to their screens. I despaired and thought perhaps we needed some kind of guidance — a book, a therapist, something, someone — to steer us through. At least if we got a dog one of my children would be happy.

I had never owned a dog and never intended to. I am a cat person. I love cats. I admire their sleekness and beauty and cool independence. Sometimes I lie down with my huge, heavy tabby cat sitting on top of me, stroking her face. I play with my small black and white cat, pulling and teasing a piece of string up and down the stairs while she pounces after it. I know I should be doing something else, but comfort myself with Freud's sage advice: "Time spent with cats is never wasted."

The "getting a dog" issue wouldn't go away, however. My husband was adamant that we couldn't take on a dog and I was worried about the cats and the commitment. Jude didn't even join the conversation. Yet Belle sensed that I had slightly relented and stepped up the campaign.

I began to look tentatively at dog charity websites. The message "adopt, don't shop" was on my mind, filtered down through friends and social media. There are so many stray or abandoned dogs needing a home, why buy from a breeder?

My friend Nicola urged me on, saying that rescue dogs can have lovely characters and are so grateful to be adopted. I looked on British dog

but so, apparently, did 20 others. There followed a flurry of emails and eventually, after fighting off the competition, Ava was ours. When I told Belle we were getting a dog she burst into hysterical tears of joy.

And so it was that I joined the nine million dog owners in the UK, although it took two further months before we would actually see her. She needed a series of vaccinations to qualify for a pet passport. I learnt that she had been dumped from a car in Cyprus with her mother when she was about two months old, and had been surviving on scraps before a British foster carer took them to live with her.

When Ava eventually travelled to Britain, Belle, Nicola and I went to fetch her from Beaconsfield services on the M40 at midnight. She was lifted down from a pet transport lorry into our arms. It was exciting, but also scary and overwhelming — like picking up a haul of something illegal.

Ava was wearing a pink harness and was not at all sure that she wanted to come home with us. Belle cuddled her in the car and took her to bed in the early hours. She licked our faces and wagged her tail and melted our hearts.

The dynamics of our family changed immediately. The first thing that happened was that we stopped shouting at one another. Ava was evidently scared and a bit perplexed and we couldn't risk frightening her. We talked in gentle voices to her and to one another. No one stomped down the stairs or slammed the door. Our lives seemed to be transformed. Her presence softened our moods.

“We needed to change. Maybe a dog would be the catalyst

rehousing websites, but we did not fit the criteria as potential owners. Most asked for families with no children or cats. Then I followed all the Instagram accounts of the Wild at Heart Foundation, whose aim is to reduce the world's 600 million stray dog population. And after we saw a Cypriot poodle on a country walk, I focused on the charity's @cypriusdogs account, which posted pictures of abandoned and stray dogs in Cyprus. For many months I looked fondly at the pictures without doing anything.

Then, last summer, I fell in love with a poodle-cross puppy. The photograph was of "Ava" staring up at the camera with a button nose and big appealing eyes. She looked like a teddy bear. I emailed straight away