

Parent Training

By Michelle R. Rasey

"Let's have a baby," my husband said.

"How about a dog? If that goes well, we can talk about kids," I countered.

Although we had been married for five years, I wasn't sure if I was ready to become a mother. There were still things I wanted to do and two a.m. feedings complete with spit up was not one of them. A baby was a hassle I didn't want and a dog seemed like a good compromise between my selfish reservations and my husband's biological clock, which was ticking as fast as a Porsche with the pedal pushed to the floor. Mine had yet to start.

Violet VanPoopy, as we came to call her, was a four-month old black lab no one wanted. We couldn't figure out why as, with her silky onyx fur, lolling tongue, and inquisitive personality, we fell in love with her instantly.

Which was a good thing since she spent the first year of her life spewing forth vomit and other fluids on a regular basis. It was as if our dog was possessed by the same demon that starred in 'The Exorcist'. We began to understand why no one had taken her home

We chased Violet around the kitchen with spoonfuls of Pepto-Bismal or Kaopectate (more ended up on the kitchen than in the dog) and could be heard imploring, "No, Violet. Don't throw up on the carpet, throw up on the linoleum!" Hundreds of dollars were spent at the vet with little improvement. The verdict? She had a sensitive stomach. Apparently, sensitive included every form of nutrition known to dog and man as Violet could hold nothing down. It also manifested in an odd tendency to be ill at precisely two and five a.m. on a regular basis. I rapidly learned how to function with little sleep.

We did everything we could to try and resolve Violet's digestive problems, from special foods to home-cooked dinners. You name it we tried it, but Violet was constantly sick and started to lose weight. The vet scratched his head and took our money along with an occasional x-ray to justify the expense. We missed work, movies, dinners, and trips to nurse her. I didn't care though, I would've done anything to see her healthy.

At the one year mark, all her digestive problems magically (and thankfully) disappeared. We celebrated by replacing all the carpet in our house—there wasn't a floor she hadn't irreparably stink-bombed—and rediscovered some of our pre-puppy activities.

"So how about that baby," my husband asked one day.

I looked at Violet who slept between us on the couch, snoring like a foghorn. I thought about all the mad dashes outside in the middle of the night, hoping we would make it before she blew. The week where we really thought she might die and how, despite her illness (whatever it was), she still greeted us with like favorite long lost relatives.

"I don't know. We barely got through the first year with a dog." My reluctance now wasn't selfish, it was more a question of whether or not I actually had the ability to keep a human infant alive.

"Babies are easier. They wear diapers and don't move around much." My husband waved his hand as if to say a baby would be a piece of cake by comparison. He was probably right, but I still wasn't sure.

"Won't she be lonely when she's not the center of attention anymore?"

"Honey, she's a dog."

I caressed one of Violet's black velvet ears and shook my head. Violet wasn't a dog. She was my first baby. "How about we get another dog, to keep her company?"

"And after that? Yet another dog?" My husband frowned at me. I could see him calculating in his head how many dogs we would own before I would agree to start a family.

"No. A baby."

"Ok, one more dog and then we move on to babies. Agreed?" He stuck out his hand.

"Agreed." We shook on it.

And that was how Mighty Midas came into our lives. He was a beautiful white lab with a chocolate nose and a heart bigger than his brain. Unfortunately, he also had problems with digestive upset. Worse, whatever he had, he gave to Violet. We now had two dogs reenacting scenes from 'The Exorcist.'

By this time, however, we were veterans. We spent less money on the vet, missed no work, and rode out the digestive upsets with good humor and several bottles of Kaopectate.

It was during a three a.m. vomit cleanup that I had my epiphany. I had learned how to care for a dog, not in health, but in sickness and I was good at it. Violet was a thriving two-year old and Midas, in spite of his occasional upsets, was doing better than Violet in her first year. Sure it had been tough, but the rewards far outweighed the sacrifices. In fact, I hardly missed my life before the dogs. I would rather spend my time with them than at the movies or anyplace else. I even showed my co-workers and strangers pictures of my dogs, like a proud mama. No matter what anyone else might think, I was already a parent.

In that moment, my hands encased in rubber gloves, and surrounded by a fog of lemony Lysol, all my concerns about starting a family evaporated.

With a happy smile, I threw out the garbage and shoveled some medicine down both dogs' throats with the warning, "You'd better stop this

nonsense. You're going to be a big brother and sister." They wagged their tails and licked medicine off the floor.

I then went back to bed, the dogs right on my heels, and cuddled up against my husband. Planting a kiss on his cheek, I said, "Honey, I think I'm ready for a baby."

He smiled, still half asleep, and pulled me close. Violet came up to the edge of the bed and nuzzled my hand as if to say, "What do you think we've been preparing you for?"

I gave a soft laugh. We were going to be great parents, after all, we'd been trained by the best.