inanimate objects fall within a category of nouns considered to be without life. Animals, on the other hand, are separated from plants and things by independent movement and reactive sense organs. When people view animals as property, they fail to see an individual with complex interests and needs.

Adults who adopt for children need to initiate a serious discussion about what the child’s relationship with the animal will entail. Rescue organizations and pet supply outlets carry books, videos and learning materials about guardianship and training. More alternate gift ideas are toys, beds, leashes, bowls and other gear. Sharing “pre-pet” time with a child can be a fun and rewarding experience.

Impulse adoptions exacerbate the pet overpopulation crisis. Shelters see a surge in surrenders after Christmas, Valentine’s Day and Easter. “The holidays, and weeks just after, promise to fill more cages and quarantine rooms...in animal shelters across the [New Jersey and New York] region,” writes Tim Norris, of NorthJersey.com, about the overflow at Ramapo-Bergen Animal Refuge in Oakland, NJ. “A fair number of arrivals will come from well-meaning adopters who misjudged the commitment.”

Conversely, informed adopters are less likely to relinquish animals. The Humane Society of the U.S. (HSUS) estimates 3 to 4 million healthy animals are euthanized every year. Other guesses range from 6 to 8 million.

Uncle Harold is dead set on giving the kids a puppy. But no-one wants a present who comes with steep veterinary bills.
Common ailments have an incubation period. Within weeks of adoption, a seemingly healthy puppy may harbor parasites, worms, respiratory infections, coccidia, giardia, and deadly parvovirus or distemper. Fragile kittens may harbor zoonotic diseases such as bacterial, parasitic, viral or fungal infections. Cats must be screened for Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP), Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV), and Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV).

Many veterinary hospitals offer puppy or kitten "packages" that include vaccinations, spay/neuter procedures, and microchip implantation. Most animals have a bit of wanderlust in them. Microchip identification is the best defense against permanent loss.

An animal’s temperament is more difficult to prearrange. Still, adopters can research which species, breeds or mixes are best suited to a particular human environment. For example, are toddlers and nipping puppies a good match? Can two working parents handle a robust dog who needs regular exercise? Should longhair shedders inhabit a neatnik home?

Where should we look for a new dog or cat — a breeder or a shelter?
Adopters can visit animal shelters, rescue/foster groups, and online networks such as Petfinder.com to find furry soul mates. Many think that shelters have no purebreds. In fact, puppy mill and breed-specific rescue groups cater to pedigreed darlings. The National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy (NCPPSP) found 25% of dogs at shelters are purebred.

There are myriad reasons to adopt animals, rather than purchase from breeders or pet shops. Reason #1: Thousands of puppies and kittens born daily cannot squeeze into the nation’s 6,000 to 8,000 shelters. Just 3-4 million are re-homed. Even when backyard breeders find homes for every litter, they unintentionally put pound pets on death row.

Stray animals propel overpopulation with countless offspring. One female dog and her young can produce 67,000 puppies in 6 years. A cat and her litter can create 420,000 kittens in 7 years. Without enough loving homes, shelter adoptions and extensive spay/neuter programs are the only viable solutions.

Furthermore, the wide-eyed pooch in the pet shop likely began her life at a commercial enterprise where puppies are mass-produced. Profit-driven “puppy mills” typically fail to provide adequate veterinary care, diet, exercise or shelter. Large sites house up to 1,000 dogs in rusted chicken wire cages heaped three or four tiers high. Urine and feces seep into lower cages. Dogs at the top swelter in the summer and freeze in the winter.

Mass breeders look for low overhead and high return. Shoddy breeding methods predispose dogs to chronic infirmities such as hip dysplasia, dislocating kneecaps, seizures, eye lesions, liver and heart disease, and autoimmune disorders. In California, a state financed study revealed almost half of pet store pups were sick or carrying diseases.

Parents can arrange educational tours for the entire family, a school classroom, or even a birthday party. At Farm Sanctuary (Watkins Glen, NY), Animal Acres (Los Angeles), or Longmeadow Rescue Ranch (Union, MO), kids can meet rescued farm critters and “adopt” one. They’re able to follow the life of their pig, cow, horse or hen through photos and stories.

Few gifts are as precious as an animal’s bottomless love. In return, we promise a warm lap, a full bowl, and guardianship for life. No one can make these promises for another. The decision to adopt comes from within.

Brenda Shoss is founder and president of Kinship Circle, a nonprofit animal advocacy organization serving the global community. Brenda’s animal-focused columns run in The Healthy Planet and she has written for The Animals Voice, Satya Magazine, VegNews, and other publications. She speaks at national animal protection events and produces humane educational materials. Brenda lives in St. Louis, Missouri.

Terri Kelly is the investigative research aide for Kinship Circle and also serves on the organization’s board. In her hometown of Anderson, Indiana she is program director for Unconditional Love Foundation, a veterinary assistant with Alexandria Animal Hospital, and a canine behavior consultant/dog trainer.