



The Basics

Empty nests breed pampered pets

Boomers are lavishing cash and attention on pets after their kids leave home. And many find it's as easy to blow a fortune on a Lhasa apso as a debutante, and maybe even more fun.

By [Marilyn Lewis](#)

Who's your baby?

If she's got a wet nose, nasty breath and canines that make confetti of your new pair of Manolo Blahniks, you're in excellent company: Spending on children is plummeting in the U.S. as we lavish ever-larger amounts on the other little beasts at home.

Take Pepper, a 5-year-old wire-haired dachshund who "fell into a tub of butter" when owners Maurice and Valerie Teich brought him home. Maurice buys and sells steel internationally; Valerie is a banker. Pepper leads a good life on Manhattan's Park Avenue and vacations in the fashionable Hamptons. He joins the Teichs each morning at the breakfast table for oranges, yogurt and toast before donning his leash and jacket. (Should he wear the shearling? The red Burberry with brass buttons? The Ralph Lauren?)

If the weather's nice, Maurice and Pepper walk, stopping for coffee and sharing a bagel. In cold or rain, Pepper sits near the doorman in the building's foyer, jumping up when he sees a cab pull up. His destination: [Ritz Canine](#), a doggie day care and deluxe dog hotel that features TV and movies, a "state-of-the-art doggie treadmill and wonderful agility toys for . . . toning up."

Pepper's day care runs about \$25 a day. When the Teichs travel, an orthopedic bed and board at Ritz runs between \$60 and \$100 a night, depending on whether Pepper has private or shared accommodations and if he partakes of room service meals and grooming.

Yes, he indulges Pepper a bit, Maurice concedes, but Pepper is family. "The only difference is, he has hair, and he has four legs," Teich says with a chuckle.

Attention turns from kids to pets

Dogs fill in for children in lots of American families these days. Many boomers -- the generation with all the money in the U.S. -- are just about done with parenting. Their nests are feeling a little empty.

"People are spending more on their pets because of marketing, that's No. 1," says consumer-trend analyst Cheryl Russell of New Strategist Publications. "Also, people are more affluent. And the third reason is that the boomers are so used to pampering their children . . . so that when their children are gone they turn all that attention to their pets."

Video: [Finding the right kennel](#)

The latest spending figures show that between 2002 and 2004 household spending on pets increased 18% after inflation while toy sales dropped 25%, spending on day-care centers fell 15%, and spending on children's clothes was down 15%.

Not only boomers are afflicted with dog love, though. Megan Rice, a Seattle teacher, says that before she and her husband became parents, they treated their Rhodesian Ridgeback, Gus, like a child. Once she bought Gus a \$100 raincoat, which he won't wear. They spent about \$30 a month on toys and treats for him.

"Here's this huge creature that we are responsible for, and he gives us nothing but positive feedback for the attention he gets. It seems that a lot of our culture is, you show your affection through buying things, even if you don't see yourself as that kind of person," says Rice, who got a firmer financial grip once their son, now 2, was born.

The essential accouterments

Laugh all you want, but the Rices and the Teichs are hardly alone. Check out a shopping list for a baby of each species, just the basics, really:

A [jogging stroller](#) for your little human can set you back \$200 or even more. Ditto for [Fluffy's stroller](#).

You'll want to tote your little darling around in a front-pack carrier, of course. For [Baby](#), it'll cost around \$70. [Fluffy's](#): around \$25.

Baby's got to eat. [Sippy cups and melamine baby dishes](#) go for under \$20. An [ergonomically correct dog dish](#) runs you \$150.

Fifty dollars -- yikes! -- will buy you a [designer baby sweater](#). But, hold on: Fluffy needs a [sweater](#), too -- and it can set you back \$50 to \$125. Add in the dog sunglasses, sunscreen, low-carb pet food, mink dog collars and leather bomber jackets and Fluff's run up quite a bill.

Of course no baby needs a \$50 sweater, and no pet needs a \$150 dog dish. Both species have thrived for millenniums without lavish expenditures. But those are where the fun is. For example:

Firefighters are starting to carry [pet-sized oxygen masks](#).

You can replace your neutered dog's missing testicles with [Neuticles](#), testicular implants for pets. (Cost: \$94 to \$129 a pair, plus veterinarian's charges.)

Meetup.com, the social networking organization, lists 1,051 [groups](#) around the country with pets as the focus. There are 167 groups for pugs alone.

Dog birthday parties, too, are gaining in popularity. At [PetBirthdayParty.com](#), you can register your dog's birthday (free), buy a congratulatory banner with Fluffy's name and find vendors offering [pup party kits](#) with accessories ranging from \$1.99 to \$17.99. (Of course, that's nothing compared with the \$300,000-plus bashes for teen party animals on MTV's "[My Super Sweet 16](#)."

Drop by a doggie bakery like the Kansas City, Mo., chain [Three Dog Bakery](#) to buy fresh-baked dog treats, including personalized heart-shaped cookies (\$7.95 each) or a \$300 custom wedding cake, says Mark Beckloff, a founder. Three Dog has eight bakeries in Japan.

"Bow vows," or dog weddings, are de rigeur. See [one](#), "Jump into This" by Seven Foot Wave, on YouTube. Find [wedding attire](#) online.

Dog weddings start at \$250 at [The Yankee Dog Retreat](#), whose owner Jennifer Cermak is the author of "[The Home Spa Book for Dogs: Nose to Tail Treatments to Soothe the Soul and Age-Proof Your Canine Companion](#)." The book contains a section on "do-ga" (dog yoga).

Psychologists and psychics

Finally, consider the story of one otherwise sane Seattle woman, a philanthropist and fund-raiser, and her costly efforts to rehabilitate a beloved Lhasa apso-cocker spaniel mix. The dog bit visitors (but never family members), forcing her at one point to replace a \$400 Armani jogging suit that the dog shredded while attacking a guest. Neither trainers nor animal psychologists nor Prozac had any effect. The bills? "Thousands of dollars. Many, *many* thousands."

Desperate, the family engaged an animal psychic in California. The psychic talked with the dog by speakerphone, insisting the owners leave the room. After nearly a dozen sessions, she concluded the pooch was burdened by responsibilities from a previous life, when he had been the leader of a pack of wild dogs.

"There are some times where you have to bite somebody," the psychic told the owners.

They finally found the dog a new home with a family in the country.