

Parent Moments: Saying Goodnight to Maggie-Dog

By Tracy Teare

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Eight years have passed, but it doesn't take much to plunge me into guilt over putting our dog Maggie to sleep. Saying goodbye to a pet who is suffering is one thing, but this was different.

Matt and I adopted Maggie -- a skittish mutt from the pound with a herder's aggressive mentality -- two years before our first children were born. She was anxious from the start, and would round up and dominate any dog who would let her. This led to a couple of ugly skirmishes, and soon I kept Maggie on the leash and avoided parks where dogs played off-leash.

Then Matt and I learned I was pregnant with twins. We had no idea what to expect from Maggie (never mind how to manage two babies); all we could do was be prepared. I found a professional trainer who specialized in aggressive dogs. He taught me to work with her instincts, told me she needed a "job," and that we needed to assume control as the head honchos of her "pack." We worked hard with him every week, and faithfully practiced our lessons twice a day. We played tapes of crying babies to get her used to the sound. When the girls were born, my husband brought home some of their tiny clothes so Maggie could get used to their smell.

It paid off. Maggie was wonderful around Caitlin and Ellie, accepting them into the fold without question. She slept by their cribs at night in the room next to ours, and walked with me twice a day alongside the stroller. The only trouble was, she took her new role as mother's helper a little too seriously and became more protective of her pack than ever. She seemed to feel a responsible for keeping visitors in line, and would especially follow our guy friends around, walking right at their heels. On occasion, she'd nip at the back of their knees. In hindsight, these were red flags we should have taken more seriously, if not for the complete sleep deficit and overwhelming nature of life with twin infants.

When our girls were 18 months old, we left urban Massachusetts for the Maine coast. Maggie, we figured, would thrive here too, with a huge yard to roam and a roomy house instead of a cramped 2nd floor apartment. But the space and quiet overwhelmed her. It was as if there was too much turf to guard and protect and she couldn't possibly cover it all. What's more, Caitlin and Ellie were no longer infants in bassinets. They had to be tracked, too, and they were constantly moving, often in opposite directions.

Maggie had two more significant clashes with other dogs. We hired another trainer. We tried a low-protein diet to lower her energy levels. We experimented with various collars. Gave her "jobs" by having her fetch, and learn more commands. Nothing solved her issues, but we were still hopeful.

Then came the day Maggie snapped at Ellie, and I knew we'd reached the point of no return. I don't know what provoked her. I was in the family room, with Maggie and the girls at the foot of the couch on the floor. Out of the blue, she turned and quickly snapped her jaws, catching Ellie's leg. No blood, no broken skin, but a line had clearly been crossed. Although I knew what had to happen, it didn't seem fair for us to play God with her life.

I spoke with our vet. I consulted more trainers. But our options seemed few. Who wanted a dog that bites? In the end, I cried a lot and made an appointment at the vet to have her put to sleep. When the dreaded day arrived, I dropped the girls at our sitter's house and drove with Maggie to the vet. She walked in, completely trusting, and minutes later got stuck with a needle and slipped away. I left in a wash of tears and haven't been able to set foot in that building since.

As I write this, my eyes brim again as the guilt and sadness return, fresh as if this were yesterday. I know I had to do what we did for the sake of our family's safety, but I don't think I'll ever feel right about ending her life. The vet sent her ashes to us. They are still sitting in our hall closet. I can't bring myself to bury her.

Two years later, we adopted another dog, a 3-year-old black Lab whose family had seen one too many trash cans dumped and had no time to get him the exercise he craved. We knew Trapper's family, so there were no wild guesses about his background or personality. He has his warts: Left to his own devices, he'll eat unlimited quantities of anything from zucchini to birdseed. He likes to bark at the FedEx guy, which sends me into fits of worry. But he is nothing but gentle with children. We adore him back. And so I hold onto my happier memories of Maggie, and try to find some redemption in the thought that we've given another misfit a home.

How about you? What role do pets play in your family's life?