



True-life tale

Alice in wonderland

Sally Ashworth explains how Doris the Brittany turned her toddler into a wilderness explorer.

As I watch my muddy three-year-old daughter trundling through the woods, singing to herself and casting spells on ants with her magic stick, I say a little thank you to my husband and children for persuading me it was time to get a dog.

Because I have to be honest; I didn't really want one.

My husband and I have five children between us; two each and a daughter together. Oh, and a big, floppy cat.

So we're busy. Very busy. But my husband adores dogs, and I knew he felt a home wasn't really a home without one.

Which is why, one dreary October morning – leaving him with four big kids, a

toddler and a cat at home – I found myself doing the 400-mile round trip from West Yorkshire to Bristol to collect an extremely lively orange and white Brittany puppy, now called Doris (after Doris Day).

I'd found Doris after doing copious amounts of research on the Internet and speaking to several breeders for advice.

If we were getting a dog, it had to be right for our family, and a Brittany seemed to fit the bill perfectly; great with children, loves lots of exercise, not too big, not too small.

Now, two years on, watching Alice and Doris curled up together on the sofa, I can say that it's one of the best choices we could have made.

It was a shock to the system when she first arrived; a little like the feeling of having a newborn baby to look after for the first time (although without the benefit of nappies).

But we soon settled into a routine that involved me and Alice taking Doris on a long walk through the woods every day when the others had left for work or school. And that is where the magic began...

PRECIOUS MEMORIES

Our morning dog walks through the beautiful Hardcastle Crag in Hebden Bridge became the highlight of our days together and have given me some of the most precious memories of my daughter's early childhood.

Two years ago, Alice was still too little to walk the whole way so I'd sling her in a baby carrier and we'd set off on our adventures. I was expecting to get fitter – that was one aspect of dog ownership I'd looked forward to – but had not expected the untold benefits our walks would have for Alice.

Autumn...

That first autumn we watched the leaves fall from the trees and every day she saw that there were a few more on the ground. She kicked them into piles with her wellies and collected ones of different colours to bring home.

Most mornings we would spot a family of deer, either grazing



Yorkshire teamwork:
Alice and Doris.

so dirty against the crisp, white snow as she bombed up and down the steep sides of the valley. We cracked the ice on the streams with our boots and sucked icicles even though we were freezing cold.

Spring...

When spring came she studied the buds on the trees and gave them words of encouragement. We marvelled at the carpet of blazing bluebells that appeared almost overnight and I had to explain why she couldn't pick a bunch to bring home.

Summer...

In summer we had picnics, paddled in the river, made dens, played bug-hunting games, sang silly made-up songs ("Twinkle twinkle naughty ants, don't crawl into Alice's pants" being my favourite), and searched endlessly for the perfect stick to make a magic wand – while Doris simply ran.

One hot day we got caught in a huge thunderstorm and had to run back up to the lane, lightning zig-zagging across the sky. We were rescued by a kind woman in a Land Rover who gave us a lift home and didn't mind that we were soaked to the skin.

We watched the woods change their colour and character as the seasons rolled on and she learned more about life cycles and the environment than she could ever discover in a classroom.

LOOKING & LEARNING

There isn't much published research on children and dog walking but Dr Carri Westgarth, an expert in human-animal interaction at the University of Liverpool, says her work and that of other scientists shows numerous benefits for adults.

And she plans to investigate how families can be encouraged to include children in dog walking more regularly.

"Unfortunately, I think due to time restraints, often one parent does it, if at all, and the rest of the family misses out on potential benefits," she explains.

But while there's not much research on children and dog walking, there are many studies that show how vital it is for them to spend time in nature.

in a field or bounding through the trees, a sight that still never fails to delight.

She began to memorise the whereabouts of special trees and plants along the way and would say "Good morning" to them on her way past. One day I slipped in the mud and grabbed hold of a branch to steady myself. It snapped, and Alice now makes me say sorry to the tree every time we pass it. The tree has become known in our house as The Sorry Tree.

Winter...

In winter we bundled ourselves up in coats, scarves, gloves and hats and I trudged through the snow with her on my back. We laughed because Doris looked

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Dr Carly Wood, who works on the University of Essex's Green Exercise Project, says spending regular time in the great outdoors is crucial for children's health and well-being – but few in today's Britain get the chance: "This lack of contact with nature has been termed 'nature-deficit disorder' and is likely to have profound effects on children's well-being.

"There's lots of evidence to show being in nature is good for children's concentration levels, self-esteem, confidence, independence, physical development and even their academic achievement."

Further, Dr Wood says that children who regularly play in natural surroundings are also better at dealing with stress than children who don't: "Importantly, it's a chance for children to play freely, use their imaginations and use up some energy, so that when they get back inside they are more relaxed and more able to focus."

LIFE LESSONS

So thank you Doris. It seems our decision to get a dog has given our daughter (and our older children too) far more than just a much-loved pet.

The chance to connect with nature in a way that we wouldn't otherwise have done – because, with the best will in the world, I would never have mustered the energy for daily walks without Doris – has given Alice the best possible start in life. ●

About the author



Sally Ashworth is a freelance writer from the picturesque Pennine village of Heptonstall, near Hebden

Bridge in West Yorkshire. She finds a morning hike through the woods with her Brittany, Doris, a perfect way to get the words flowing.

Together, Alice and Doris have been on some incredible journeys.



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