

Cats never use the swing set

Bill Hall

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My wife and I live our lives like many other slightly demented elders in that we prefer having kids around who walk on all fours to no kids at all. That's why we pulled down the swing set the other day. The hairy kids never used it.

I refer, of course, to cats and dogs, Asian hogs, hamsters and birds, not to mention horses and the occasional homicidal chimpanzee - in other words, substitute children.

In reality, pets are stolen children - puppies and kittens and other sawed-off little creatures that have been kidnapped from their rightful parents and brought up like human kids. And it almost works for most of us, except for a bizarre deviation of the little creatures. They have hair all over their bodies instead of in the customary locations of human beings.

I don't know about your family, but only a small percentage of the children in our family have ever been overwhelmed by their own hair, and then only during the teenage years.

Those real human children have long since fled the nest. So we have dismantled the swing set that was once a child magnet. Today, we live only with imaginary children.

However, when you adopt baby pets to fill your yawning empty nest and pretend that you still have children, you have two choices: Ignore the excessive amounts of body hair on your substitute children or shave them on a regular basis in ways that create the illusion this is an actual human child - a peculiar child chronically on all fours and incapable of normal speech.

The more wistfully an aging couple remembers the time of real children, the more likely they are to opt for shaving a dog. That alone explains the addled attachment of some people to poodles. And it's not just that they shave those fake kids; anybody who would shower affection on something called a poodle - a baby talk name for a dog - has killed too many brain cells with booze, drugs or Larry King worship.

I know the universal truth of these things because, when I write about the substitute children in the homes of empty nesters, numerous readers tell me that's the way it is at their house. And that includes people like my wife, who misses children so

much that she unintentionally humiliates me by calling me Daddy while talking to the cats.

Talking to cats by itself is enough to get a person sent to the State Home for the Linguistically Confused, let alone playing house with animals while telling those animals we are Mommy and Daddy. This is some kind of throwback to the years long ago when small girls dressed a cat in doll clothing and pretended they were the skuzzy little beast's "Mommy."

Boys like me never did anything that extreme. We played in normal, imaginative ways like putting a frog in a toy car and pretending it was the president in his new limousine.

The subject of cat kids and dog kids recently came up at a gathering of older people and I asked them to tell me truthfully if they are known in their homes as Mommy and Daddy to a cat or a dog. Almost everyone owned up to it, and a couple of those who didn't were lying through their fangs.

My wife and I try to give our cat kids quality time. One of the ways we want to do that is to go down to our rose and vegetable garden and let Jack and Annie trail along. The fact is, cats enjoy romping out there among the plants and bugs. And they don't really care about the swing set. They never have.

So I took it apart. Even the grandkids are becoming adults these days. No little people come running any more wanting to use the swing set.

Meanwhile, the cats can't garden with us since the coyotes moved into the neighborhood and started dining on our substitute kids. We don't dare let the cat children outside, except in a fenced enclosure.

So we're building a cat fence around the vegetables and the roses. We had to give up the swing set to make room. The cats never used the swing set anyway. They don't have opposable thumbs and can't hang on to the ropes.

We had no choice. Deep down, we know those aren't exactly real children, but real or not, they aren't something you feed to coyotes. What kind of Mommy and Daddy do you think we are?

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