

The scene unfolding in the driveway of Dogwood Acres Pet Retreat could have been staged at the door to a kindergarten classroom on the first day of school. "I can't do this. I can't do this," the distraught dog owner cried, collapsing in hysteria. "I can't leave him." The fact that the woman had her 3-year-old daughter in tow only proved to Dogwood's office manager Diane Schwartz that dogs aren't just like family. Sometimes, they are the best-loved members of a clan. "I'd say people treat their pets better than their kids. One man stood right here and whacked his kid because (he was interrupting the man while) he was talking about his dog's diet," Ms. Schwartz said. "He told the kid, 'This is important.'" It's not surprising that people treat their pets as well as, if not better than, family, said Frank Branchini, executive director of the SPCA of Anne Arundel County. After all, the affection of an animal is the one love money can buy. "Sometimes animals treat you better than family," Mr. Branchini said. "They'll never tell you you look fat." Dogs — historically banished to the outdoors — now enjoy a proximity to adult humans that some schoolchildren are denied. That proximity pays off in lots of lucrative ways for lucky canines. According to a 1996 survey done by the American Humane Society, 63 percent of dog owners say they give their pets presents for Christmas. Forty percent hang stockings for their pooch. Ten percent carry a photo of their dog with them, and it goes on and on. Dogs can let themselves in and out of specially designed doors, eat whenever — and whatever — their owners eat, and even go on family vacations to pet-friendly locations. Pet groomer Dawn Dehlinger said the desire to pamper pets simply grows from the fact that pets are more cooperative than most family members. "I sometimes wish my son was as well-behaved as my dogs," Ms. Dehlinger said. Still, she said, little justifies the clients who pay \$60 or \$80 to have their dogs groomed and don't seem to pay any attention to their children's grooming. Pack up the U-Haul. Of course, not every pet owner puts Fido on a pedestal. Some simply erect small thrones in each room where the dogs can wait out the hours in their owners' absence. Five spoiled Scottish terriers and a sky terrier make themselves at home on Yvonne Kazan's elegant living room furniture. The Millersville breeder says she spends more money on the dogs than she does on herself. But nothing she has done — not the liver cookie treats or Swedish massages — compares to the pampering some of her clients receive. Every other week she grooms a Shih Tzu named Meesha who dined on nothing but filet mignon for the three weeks prior to Christmas. Another woman puts her Scottie in a different leash and outfit every time she goes outside. "I spoil my dogs to pieces. But sometimes I can't believe my eyes," said Mrs. Kazan, who also runs the For Top Dogs Pet Resort. "One dog came here for the holidays with a suitcase packed with a pillow, a blanket, food bowls, toys and three changes of clothes, which, yes, I changed." Pet owners continue to astound Ms. Schwartz as well. She keeps stacks of instructions from clients, with the intention of someday writing a book about their quirky demands. She'll probably include in it the lady who pulled up to the kennel with a U-Haul. "What's that for?" asked Ms. Schwartz, whose dog comes to work with her. "That's the living room couch," the woman said. "You told me we could bring our dog's bed." Is Chaz there? Who spoils their pet? "Everyone does spoil to an extent," Mr. Branchini said. Indeed, in 1995, Americans spent \$5.5 billion on dog food and \$1 billion on treats. Another 16 percent claimed to have selected their home or automobile with their pet in mind. People without human children tend to take their indulgences a bit further than those with children, said Melody Mills, owner of the Millersville Pet Salon. They're the ones who drop off their dogs with ample supplies of 80-cent pig's ear treats, grandma's quilt and a tote bag with the dog's name embroidered on it. Owners of upscale kennels with heated floors and air-conditioned stalls say they are bombarded with phone calls from their charges' traveling owners and are frequently asked to put dogs on the

phone with their owners. "They'll call and ask for the dog by it's nickname," Mrs. Mills said. "If the dog's name is Charlie, they'll call and say 'Can I speak with Chaz?' And we're looking around going, 'Who's that?'" One man warned Ms. Schwartz not say anything about his poodle's unsightly skin condition because it would hurt her self-esteem. "I said, 'I would never,'" Ms. Schwartz said. In the pet owner's defense, people are not always as deserving of such consideration, said Mr. Branchini, who credits his dogs with intuition and genuine kindness. "You can be overly cynical about it and say that dogs don't know that it's Christmas so why buy them presents? But we do because we want to make it a special day for them," he said. "Animals are nonjudgmental. How many humans can you say that about?"