

Choosing the Best Dog for Your Family

There really are no “bad” dogs. But a good dog for one family might be a bad choice for another. The *best* dog is the one that’s the best match with the owner’s personality and lifestyle. So, how does a family choose the right family dog?

First, the family must be ready to make a life-long commitment. Dogs are not toys that can be cast aside when the novelty wanes, or when the 20 pound bundle of fur grows into a 200 pound drool machine.

As much as the children might desire a pet, the adults need to determine if the family as a whole has time for housebreaking, training, exercise and companionship. It’s unrealistic to expect children to be the primary caretakers, although they can certainly be given age-appropriate responsibilities. If there are babies or toddlers in the household, it’s best to wait until the children are 5 to 6 years old. Young children and dogs require constant supervision, for everyone’s safety and comfort.

Does the family budget allow for the associated costs that extend beyond the initial purchase price or adoption fee, including routine and emergency veterinary care, spaying/neutering, grooming, training lessons, food and supplies? How about living arrangements? Dogs need fenced yards, secure kennel runs or a committed owner willing to walk the dog several times a day. There are also legal and insurance considerations, especially for families living in condos, apartments or neighborhoods where pet ownership is restricted.

Once the family members have agreed that they’re ready, willing and able to provide for a pet, it’s time to consider the various breeds, or mixed breeds, and narrow down their selection to those that best match the family’s lifestyle and personality. Consider the following:

- Assertiveness. Dominant owners can handle breeds that tend to be more headstrong, but if one or more members of the family tend to be passive or laid-back, the best dog will be less dominant and more willing.
- Household activity. A family with lots of friends and children passing through needs a dog with an outgoing personality that won’t get stressed, defensive or protective.
- Energy level. A high-energy dog in a sedentary household won’t work. Breeds described as needing lots of exercise *need lots of exercise!* A walk around the block won’t take the edge off a dog that was bred to herd sheep many hours a day.
- Grooming & shedding tolerance. Some breeds shed a lot and some shed more. Does the family prefer the type of hair that floats across the kitchen floor like little tumbleweeds or the kind that works itself into the fabric of the couch and has to be extracted with tweezers?
- Puppy patience. It takes time and supervision to housebreak a puppy. Puppies go through rebellious adolescent phases, just like humans. Does the family have the patience and discipline to puppy-proof the household and deal with nipping, mouthing, stealing, digging and other typical puppy problems? Or, would the family be happier with an older dog who’d outgrown these issues?

There are numerous online resources available to help the prospective dog family locate that perfect dog, whether it be a mixed breed adult or purebred puppy obtained from a shelter, rescue organization or breeder. For links to local organizations and the American Kennel Club, visit <http://akc.org>.

The following is an outline of a Family Dog Training Center seminar that we offer free of charge. Check our list of upcoming events for the next seminar. You’ll also find a wealth of information at The American Kennel Club.

The responsibilities of dog ownership:

1. Time for housebreaking, training, exercise and companionship;
2. Money for initial purchase, puppy + annual vaccinations + wormings, routine + emergency veterinary care, spaying/neutering, grooming, training classes, food, and supplies such as kennel, leashes, toys, combs, brushes, etc.;
3. Proper indoor and outdoor facilities, including fenced yard or kennel run;
4. Legal implications;

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Mixed breeds & rescue dogs welcome.

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5. Insurance implications

Match the Dog's Personality and Exercise Requirements to Your Lifestyle:

1. Naturally assertive owners can handle more dominant breeds of dogs, whereas naturally passive people should avoid dominant dogs;
2. Active households with lots of visitors should select dogs that are comfortable with commotion and avoid the more solitary dogs;
3. Unless the owners desire a "challenge," they should select a breed that has a high natural desire to obey and please humans;
4. Low-energy owners should choose a dog requiring little exercise as many breeds of dogs require a great deal of exercise in order to prevent behavior problems;
5. Prospective owners should realistically evaluate their tolerance to shedding and grooming requirements;
6. People who spend very little time at home should think twice about getting a dog;
7. Individuals with limited time and patience for housebreaking might do better with an older puppy or adult dog;
8. Never get a dog unless the entire family is willing to share the responsibilities.

Children in the Household?:

1. For easiest transition, and fewest relationship problems, wait until the child is at least 5 or 6 before purchasing a dog;
2. Include the child in research and selection process on limited basis;
3. Give the child limited responsibilities for care of dog -- entire family must be willing to participate;
4. Never get a dog "just for the kids" as it never works out that way;
5. Select a dog that does well with children (toy breeds and smaller dogs are not good choices for kids).

Male vs. Female Dog / Puppy vs. Adult Dog:

1. Spaying/neutering will prevent male dog territoriality and female dog heat cycles;
2. Altering tends to neutralize the difference between male and female dogs, thereby making both suitable pets;
3. Spaying/neutering helps prevent cancer as well as many behavior problems, yet it does not result in negative side effects (does not make dogs fat, lazy, less protective, etc.);
4. Never purchase a puppy before 7 weeks of age, in fact the longer it stays with its mother and littermates, the fewer behavior problems the puppy will have;
5. Younger puppies require more time and attention -- housebreaking, manners, etc.;
6. Older puppies and adult dogs may have behavior problems -- get all the facts;
7. Older dogs may take more time to adjust to their new family -- so be patient.

Select a Reputable Breeder Who Guarantees His/Her Dogs: Note: These are generalizations and there are exceptions to every rule (rarely):

1. Avoid big breeders who produce many litters a year (puppy mill);
2. Avoid individuals who own both parents (backyard puppy mill);
3. Avoid pet stores;
4. Select a small, home-based breeder who only has 1-2 litters a year (maximum), who is active in conformation as well as obedience or hunting/field trialing/herding/tracking/etc. Ask for references. Pedigree should contain lots of champions and performance titles. Dogs should be guaranteed against major health defects. The breeder should interrogate you regarding your suitability to own one of his/her puppies and should tell you the pro's and con's of this particular breed. The breeder should also provide a written contract and give you 24-48 hours to have dog checked by your veterinarian -- dog may be returned within this time period for any reason and money refunded. Make certain you understand the difference between "finishable --championship highly likely" vs. "show potential -- the dog has no disqualifying faults but probably would not finish a championship" vs. "pet quality -- dog has faults which preclude a championship" in the event you want to show your dog. "Faults" are not defects that impact a dog's ability to become a wonderful pet. "Faults" typically include minor defects in structure (tailset, earset, shoulder layback, etc.) or looks (coat texture, color, pigmentation, etc.) Have the breeder identify each puppy's faults as they relate to the breed standard (if the breeder says there are none, beware -- no dog is perfect!).

Health Concerns:

During your research, determine your breed's particular health concerns, e.g. hip dysplasia, heart problems, eye problems, spinal problems, etc., etc. As you interview breeders, ask what they are doing to minimize these problems and what guarantees they provide against major health defects.

About Mixed Breed Dogs:

Mixed breeds are not healthier than purebred dogs (that really is a myth). There can be more "surprises" with mixed breeds of unknown parentage (size, coat, temperament, health problems, etc.). If you are planning to adopt a mixed breed dog, the more you can find out about its parents, the more knowledgeable your decision will be.

Evaluating an Individual Puppy or Dog: Note:

Again, these are generalizations that are intended to help the average dog owner find the "best" dog for his/her lifestyle.

1. Avoid dogs that are extremely shy, as this fear often results in fear aggression;
2. Avoid dogs that are described as "alpha" or "pack leaders" as these dogs are typically too dominant for the average household;
3. Avoid dogs who have not been properly socialized -- again this can result in major behavior problems;
4. Select a dog who is outgoing, friendly and seems comfortable around you after a short period of time;
5. Visit the dog 2 or 3 times before taking it home as each visit will enlighten you;
6. Watch the dog interact with its littermates and/or other dogs -- compare that behavior with the dog's behavior when it's alone with humans.

Some of the Wrong Reasons to Get a Dog:

1. For the children;
2. To give as a gift;
3. To raise puppies and make money;
4. Just for protection;
5. Because you feel sorry for it;
6. On impulse!

On the other hand, the benefits of dog ownership include:

1. Improved owner health -- lower blood pressure readings, slower pulse rates, etc.;
2. Companionship;
3. Devotion;
4. Unconditional love;
5. Easier to live with than a lot of people!

Obedience Training & Household Manners:

Housebreaking and household manners should begin the moment the new puppy walks through the door. Use an airline kennel to help with housebreaking and prevention of behavior problems. Enroll in a Puppy Manners or beginning obedience class as soon as possible to help ensure the dog learns the right way. Encourage all family members to participate with the care and training of the dog.

Still Undecided?:

Take a few typical days from your life and imagine them with a dog. If you're prepared to adjust your schedule and lifestyle to accommodate a canine companion, then welcome to "life in the dog house!" If not now, then maybe in a few years!

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