

SELECTING THE FAMILY DOG: HOW TO FIND THE DOG OF YOUR DREAMS

"Select" is defined in the dictionary by such phrases as "a preferred choice" or "carefully chosen". Selecting the family dog should be a well-researched and carefully soul-searched activity. Are you and your family willing to make a 10 - 15 year commitment to this sentient being in sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer, for as long as all shall live? Let's pose some of the questions family members should discuss before obtaining a dog, after which we will look at where to obtain the carefully chosen dog of your dreams.

HOW OLD ARE THE MEMBERS OF MY FAMILY?

If the youngsters in your household are under seven years old, they are usually not developmentally suited for puppies 5 months old and under or toy-sized (under 15 pounds) dogs of any age. Puppies have ultra sharp "milk teeth" and toenails and often teethe on and scratch children, resulting in unintentional injury to the child. The puppy becomes something to be feared rather than loved.

Toy dogs are fine-boned, touch-sensitive creatures that do not weather rough or clumsy handling well. They break relatively easily and are quicker to bite than their larger boned, mellower relatives.

Unless your children are unusually sensitive, low-key, respectful individuals, a medium-to-large sized dog over 5 months old is usually the safer choice. Regardless of size, all interactions between small children and dogs should be monitored by a responsible adult. When there is no one to watch over them, they should be separated.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, are there frail elderly or physically challenged individuals in the household? If so, strong vigorous adolescent dogs are not a wise idea. No aging hips or wrists are safe from these yahoos. People who were one-breed fans throughout their lives may one day find that their favorite breed demands more than they can physically handle. The new dog must fit the current physical capabilities of his keepers with an eye toward what the next 10-15 years will bring.

WHO WILL BE THE DOG'S PRIMARY CARETAKER?

A decade or so back, this was an easy question to answer-- Mom. She stayed home and cooked, cleaned and raised the family dog. Most families these days do not have that option. All adults have to go to work and the kids head off to school. This leaves the family dog to be sandwiched in between lessons and sports and household chores and so on. One parent should be designated Primary Caretaker to make sure the dog does not get lost in the shuffle.

Some parents bow to the pressure their children put on them to get a dog. The kids promise with tears in their eyes that they will religiously take care of this soon-to-be best friend. The truth of the matter is, during the 10 - 15 year lifespan of the average dog, your children will be growing in and out of various life stages and the family dog's importance in their lives will wax and wane like the Moon. You cannot saddle a child with total responsibility for the family dog and threaten to get rid of it if the child is not providing that care. It is not fair to child or dog.

Choosing the family dog should include input from all family members with the cooler-headed, more experienced family members' opinions carrying a bit more weight. The family dog should not be a gift from one family member to all the others. The selection experience is one the entire family can share. Doing some research and polling each family member about what is important

to them in a dog will help pin down what you will be looking for. Books like Daniel Tortora's THE RIGHT DOG FOR YOU or The ASPCA Complete Guide to Dogs can be tremendously helpful and can warn you away from unsuitable choices for your family's circumstances.

HOW MUCH CAN I SPEND?

The price to obtain a dog runs the gamut from free-to-a-good-home to several thousand dollars. It does not always hold true that you get what you pay for. The price you pay in a pet shop is usually 2 to 3 times higher than what you pay a reputable breeder for a puppy of similar (or usually better) quality.

Too many folks spend all their available cash on a pet shop purchase and then have no money left for initial veterinary care, a training crate or obedience classes--all necessary expenses. Remember, the purchase price of a dog is a very small part of what the dog will actually cost. Save money for food (especially if it is a large or giant breed), grooming (fancy coated breeds such as Poodles, Cockers, and Shih Tzus need to be clipped every 4 to 6 weeks), chew toys (the vigorous chewers like a Bull Terrier or Mastiff can work their way through a \$8.00 rawhide bone in a single sitting), outerwear (short-coated breeds like Greyhounds, Chihuahuas, and Whippets must have sweaters and coats in the winter or in lavishly air conditioned interiors), and miscellaneous supplies (bowls, beds, brushes, shampoos, flea products, odor neutralizers for accidents, baby gates, leashes, collars, heartworm preventative etc.).

And then, there is the veterinary emergency! Very few dogs live their entire lives without at least one accident. Your puppy eats a battery or pair of pantyhose, your fine-boned toy breaks a leg, your big boy has bad hips, your dog gets hit by a car or beaten/bitten by the neighborhood bully. These surprises can cost \$500 or more. Unlike our children, most of our dogs are not covered by health insurance.

But "How much can I spend?" is not only a question of money. How much time and energy can you spend on a new dog? Various breeds and ages of dog make different demands on our precious spare time. In general, the Sporting, Hounds, Herding, and Terrier breeds will demand more time in training and daily exercise than will the Guardian or Companion breeds. A puppy or adolescent will need more exercise, training, and supervision than will an adult dog. And the first year with any new dog regardless of age or breed type will put more demands on the owner than any other time, for this is when you are setting up house rules and routines which will last for the lifetime of your dog.

WHERE TO GET THE DOG OF YOUR DREAMS

Where you go to get the family dog depends on whether you have decided on a purebred or a mixed breed dog. If knowing what size, shape, and general temperament your puppy is going to be when he grows up is important to you or you wish to compete in American or United Kennel Club dog activities, then getting a purebred would be right for you. If a one-of-a-kind look and a loving personality combined with the warm glow you get from "saving" a dog is more important, then a mixed breed would be right up your alley. Puppies are cute but demand lots of supervision & training. In a full-time working house-hold, older dogs are easier to integrate than are puppies.

The following are eight avenues to obtain a dog. The first three are highly recommended, the next two can work out but leave more to chance, and the last three should be avoided like the Plague.

Humane Societies || Reputable Breeders || Rescue Groups || Rescuing a Stray ||
Newspaper Ads || Pet Shops || Backyard Breeders || Commercial Breeders

I. LOCAL HUMANE SOCIETIES/SPCAs/ANIMAL SHELTERS

Most shelters offer adoption programs and are staffed with trained counselors experienced in matching families with suitable companions. An application is usually filled out so the staff is made familiar with your needs and limitations. Most animals have been screened for major health and temperament problems. Many shelters offer additional free services such as training materials, shots, initial check-up, and spay/neuter surgery. Both pure and mixed breed dogs can be found in shelters, but purebred puppies are seldom found here. The cost is usually quite reasonable especially considering the entire Adoptions package you get. For a list of shelters in your area, check your Yellow Pages under "Animal Shelters."

II. REPUTABLE BREEDERS

For those searching for a sound, purebred puppy, a reputable breeder is the answer. This person specializes in only one or two breeds of dog, has been linked with this particular breed for at least five years, is a member in good standing of his/her national breed club, and will usually take back the dog if for some reason it does not work out. Often a reputable breeder will not breed a litter unless she has pre-screened candidates on a waiting list for the puppies. They breed no more than a few times a year because their puppies are raised in the home and provided with early socialization and stimulation. They would never take a pup from the mother and littermates earlier than seven weeks of age, sometimes even later. They can discuss the Pros and Cons of this breed with you in depth. They will screen you as vigorously as a humane society would for they feel totally responsible for the puppies they bring into this world.

The cost of the dog will depend on its age, and whether it is show quality, pet quality or breeding stock. The pet quality puppy prices are usually much more reasonable than in a pet shop, plus most breeders make themselves available to knowledgeably answer your various questions on this particular dog or breed in general -- something most pet shop employees cannot do.

Finding a good breeder can take some time. Contact the national breed club or your local dog clubs to see if they have a breeder referral service. Go to a dog show in your area, buy the catalogue and go talk to the folks whose dogs most appeal to you -- after they leave the show ring. Subscribe to the breed magazine and contact people who advertise in it. These are usually serious show people who care about the placement of their dogs and puppies. Check the American Kennel Club website (www.AKC.org) for breeder and club referrals. A reputable breeder will serve as a safety net for her puppies throughout their lives and will generally take them back should there be problems.

III. PUREBRED RESCUE GROUP

With the substantial number of purebred dogs being turned in at

shelters, many breed organizations have started rescue networks. Here, people with knowledge of a particular breed either rescue a dog turned in to a shelter or they send someone from their waiting list to adopt the dog from the shelter. The cost to adopt is usually quite minimal (\$100-300), but often these rescue dogs may need immediate medical treatment and/or a commitment to neuter the dog as soon as possible - if it has not already been done. Often little is known about their individual backgrounds, but the rescue contact can help the adopter with general breed questions and training methods. In some cases, breed experts go to the shelter to evaluate the rescue candidates. Most potential adopters are carefully screened before being put on a waiting list. Rescue groups can be found by contacting the national breed club or your local animal shelter.

IV. RESCUING A STRAY OFF THE STREET

In this situation, the heart leads the way. Taking in a stray is taking in an unknown entity-- no history and no safety net. It can work for some people, especially if the timing is right and you were looking for a dog of this type anyway. Often times, there are medical and temperament problems that are not solvable without considerable time and expense. Go cautiously with your eyes open, if this is the route you choose to obtain the family dog.

V. NEWSPAPER ADS/SIGNS IN GROCERY STORES AND THE LIKE

If someone is giving away his dog for an acceptable reason, obtaining a dog this way can be advantageous. You have a chance to speak with the former owner, find out the dog's routine and habits, and have a chance to see the dog in a relatively non-stressful environment. However, you are relying on the fact that the former owner is not lying to you. Many people find they have created dogs whose habits they cannot live with; yet they still love those dogs and want to see them in a home -- just not their homes.

VI. PET SHOP

Most pet shops deal only in purebred puppies. These dogs are usually purchased from puppy mills or big scale commercial breeders. These puppies are not brought up in a healthy home environment, nor are they well-socialized and stimulated to the world around them. They are taken from their under-socialized mother and littermates too early to be developmentally sound and placed in a stressful, unsanitary environment. The results are all too often sickly puppies that are nearly impossible to housebreak and have lost all bite inhibition. Pet shops thrive primarily because of two segments of society: (1) the impulse buyer and (2) the person who is averse to a screening process. Those who have taken the time to research their options are seldom best served by acquiring a pet shop pup.

Note: In the last few years, large pet supply chains have invited local shelters and rescue groups to bring their adoptable dogs to the stores for meet-and-greet sessions. The resulting adoptions are ruled by the individual group's policies. This can be a win-win situation for all parties.

VII. BACKYARD BREEDERS

These are those "savvy" economists who believe that because they purchased a dog, this dog should earn back its purchase price by producing puppies or generating big stud fees. The truth is, if you do it right, there is no profit on a litter of puppies. You are lucky if you don't end up in debt! Do not support this nonsense. If Fred finds out that there is no market for his poorly bred, garage-raised puppies, maybe he will stop mating his snappish Cocker with Millie's down the road.

VIII. COMMERCIAL BREEDERS

Whether they are Midwest puppy mill farms or one-breed kennels so big that they always have puppies for sale, they are commercial breeders and that's not the kind of start in life you want for your special family companion. The high volume of these operations does not provide for the close daily examination a new pup deserves. How can they possibly know if the puppy is eating enough, warm enough, healthy enough? Many of the puppies available through puppy brokers found on the internet come out these kennels. Use your consumer powers and boycott these facilities that treat puppies like "products."

America has become a nation of disposable pet owners. Doesn't your family dog deserve better? Choose wisely, for when the bond breaks, everybody concerned suffers. Make selecting your new family dog a life-affirming act.

Jacque Lynn Schultz
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