

There are many factors to consider when choosing the right dog for your family: your expectations for the dog, possible effects on your lifestyle, and the time the dog will require. Breed, sex, and individual or familial characteristics also require thought. Breeds were developed for jobs, and that job – herding, carting, or being a lap dog - affects how dogs behave. Dogs from working dog lines are behaviorally different than dogs from pet lines. You need to know whether these concerns apply to your dog.

**Exercise requirements:** Do you want a running partner? If so a young, healthy, large breed dog such as a Labrador or golden retriever may be a good match. If a couch potato is more your speed consider a small or toy breed, or even an older adult dog whose behavior is known. One well established exception is the greyhound. Greyhounds have been dubbed the “60 mph couch potato” because they actually don’t require much exercise at all (and they are easy to groom!!).



*A classically curious greyhound face!*

**Medical requirements:** Some breeds, such as English bulldogs are notorious for having multiple medical problems which can be costly to treat or manage. Some breeds have substantially shorter lives than others. Other dogs live into their teens with only a health check from your veterinarian once to twice yearly. When you commit to a dog you commit to all of this, so by doing your homework, you can make choices that are best for your individual family’s needs and desires.

**Age matters:** Puppy or an adult dog?

**Social exposure** - If you bring your puppy home early (8.5-12 weeks is ideal) you have influence over their sensitive period of social exposure and should take full advantage of this opportunity. During this time puppies are like sponges, taking in new environments and new social experiences. This is the period when they are maximally open to new situations and to meeting new people and other animals. This window of opportunity changes quickly between weeks 16 and 20. You can help ‘vaccinate’ your puppy against future behavior problems by ensuring quality social exposure during this early period. ***This point cannot be stressed enough*** - you will never get this period in your puppy’s life back and appropriate social exposure that helps your puppy develop age appropriate social skills and manners can make all the difference in your puppy’s future. Adult dogs may already have acceptable social skills, but you need to find out if these will work in your family.

**Training** - The behaviors that come most naturally to young puppies are: mouthing, jumping on people, running around and urinating in the house. This is no one’s description of an ideal dog! Puppies are babies and need to learn behaviors that are socially acceptable to humans. Kind, humane, positive training can hone these behaviors in a way that meets your and the dog’s needs. If you adopt an older dog, they may already have some desired social skills. If not, older dogs, with the same type of training, learn expected behaviors quickly.

**Social Maturity** - When your puppy grows up, problems may arise. Dogs do not reach social maturity until 1-3 years of age. During this time their brain chemistry changes and they may also change

behaviorally. This is when housemates may start fighting with each other over toys, attention...anything. Interestingly, research shows that two female dogs are most likely to fight, and a male and female pair is least likely to do so<sup>1</sup>.

**The special case of adult dogs** - Nothing in life is guaranteed, but adult dogs can be known entities, compared to puppies. If that dog has lived with someone for at least 1 month that person may be able to tell you about the individual dog’s personality, likes, dislikes, et cetera. Dogs from breed rescues are generally assessed to see which home style is best for them. More shelters are trying to do these types of evaluations. Dogs may still behave differently in a new home and everyone should know about the “honeymoon period”. Dogs may seem angelic before they get their footing, so if behavior problems start to appear after a few months, get help from your veterinarian and/or a specialist immediately!! The earlier the help, the faster the dog turns around.

**Should I get my puppy from a breeder?** The term ‘breeder’ varies widely to include ‘backyard breeders’ who may have little to no experience in breeding to highly experienced breeders who are very conscientious, work hard to eliminate genetic defects and make every effort preserve the physical and behavioral characteristics of the breed. Members of the latter group are very selective about who gets their puppies and most have ethical agreements that note that they will take back puppies who do not work for you. So what can you do?

1. You can and should research the breeder.
2. You should meet the parents of the puppy you are considering.
3. You should interview others who have adopted puppies from the breeder. Ask about behavioral and physical problems. Ask about breeder support. Ask about how happy the dog is and how happy they are with the dog.
4. Although there are no guarantees, by doing your homework you may be able to get a good idea of the behavior and personality of the puppy you are interested in buying.

**What about rescue puppies?**

You may be able to meet the mother of a rescue puppy as well, but often less information is available about the breed, parents, familial behaviors and early experiences. Early experiences matter. Some puppies and dogs – whether they come from a breeder or rescue - have special needs, and it is best that you have some idea that those needs will exist and how you will manage them before you take the dog.

**Final words:** Consider consulting your veterinarian or a veterinary behaviorist before adopting or purchasing a dog or puppy. They can help you match your family’s expectations and life style to a few types of dog (age, breed, sex, behavioral characteristics). Choosing wisely – and a bit of luck - will bring you many years of priceless companionship and unconditional love!



*Soft ears and a lifetime of love!*

<sup>1</sup> Wrubel KM, Moon-Fanelli A, Maranda LS, Dodman NH. Interdog household aggression: 38 cases (2006-2007). J Am Vet Med Assoc 2011;238:731–740.