

# Choosing the "Right" Dog... Ask a Trainer

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Dear Readers,

It's that time of year again, when many people seek to add a canine companion to their homes. *The following is a reprint to help make a good choice:*

Summertime is often the time when the image of children and dogs romping together in tall fields of grass, or splashing together in lapping ocean waves sends people in search of a dog to share in their lives. Of course, there are far more reasons for people to want to add a dog to their household than to share with children, but there is a common goal of finding "the perfect dog."

In their search of the "perfect" dog, many people walk into shelters and contact rescue groups with visions of adopting the dog of their dreams. While on this quest to find the perfect match, many have a list of requirements that includes a dog that is loyal, easy to care for, already housetrained, and one that will not interrupt their life-style.

Unfortunately, if these are the only considerations in choosing a dog, you might be coming away from an adoption with a dog that is not appropriate for you or your lifestyle, and could leave you sadly disappointed in the entire process.

There is no such creature as "the perfect dog" (unless it's a stuffed toy); but it is possible to find the "right" dog for most homes and living conditions by setting and sticking to the criteria designed before you go looking.

## **How to decide**

Choosing the right dog isn't (and shouldn't be) as simple as "He's cute, she's the right size, or I like the breed." Many considerations should be examined before making this important and long-term decision.

First, adopting a dog should be for the animal's entire lifetime. Dogs should not be any more disposable than children. Anyone considering dog companionship should not only understand this, they should enlighten themselves to the shocking animal shelter euthanasia figures that reach millions upon millions each year in the United States.

Next, adding an animal to your household should not be a hurried decision. This decision will have a life-style-changing outcome, and careful, educated planning is necessary for the safety and happiness of the adopter, the dog and ultimately the community. Take your time.

## **Getting Started**

After you consider your environment-- things such as the size of yards and proper fencing, or neighbors-- finding the "right" dog for your household can be somewhat narrowed down to the following:

- Choose a breed that matches your life-style
- Look at the amount of time you have for a dog
- Examine your motivation for wanting a dog
- Make a commitment
- Plan for the future

With this basic list as a starting place, you can now further examine each point in detail to see not only if you are looking for the proper dog, but if you should be looking at all.

## **Breed**

If you have a specific breed in mind, you will need to consider what the dog was bred for and how far out of his or her element the dog might be in your home. For example, if the dog was bred for herding (German Shepherds, Collies, Corgis, Australian Shepherds, etc.) and you live in an apartment or have a small yard and limited time to devote to the animal, you might not appreciate the results when the dog finds a "job" to satisfy his need to work. A herding dog doesn't have to "herd" to be happy, but they will need things to do that can direct all that intense energy.

## **Time**

The amount of time you have to devote to a dog should always be considered before making your final decision. If you are thinking about a puppy, but you work eight hours a day--think again! A young puppy has limited bladder control, is teething and will have lots of energy that needs to be directed into positive behavior. It's unfair, to leave a puppy unattended for long periods of time. Puppies need to be considered as fragile as babies, and most sane people wouldn't consider leaving a baby unattended for even small time periods. Many older dogs are already housetrained and ready to kick back, and often are overlooked, but sometimes would make a better choice for busy people.

All dogs need quality interaction with their families (the humans) if you expect a well-behaved, happy dog.

## **Motive**

If children are your motivation for getting a dog, you have an even greater responsibility. You need to take extra care and consideration in choosing the personality of the animal, as well as the breed and size of a dog. A dog that has a high energy level by nature might be able to keep up with an energetic family but may require more time and training to channel that enthusiasm into positive activities. A larger animal might be strong enough to knock over and hurt a small child if the dog has not been trained to understand space boundaries.

You should also ask yourself if you expect your children to "take care of the dog." If so, you are going to be disappointed, and the dog is going to suffer. Children cannot be expected to give full-time care to a dog. All too often, dogs are brought to the shelter after a failed attempt at teaching a child "responsibility." It's better to teach by example, or give a child extra chores than to risk the very life of an animal. If the children are adolescents it's always best to consider if a new driver's license is going to compete with the care of a dog in a few years, not to mention busy schedules of teenagers today.

If your motive is to give an existing dog a companion because your dog is displaying negative behavior such as digging or barking, then you may just compound the problem. Adding another dog could double your trouble! Remember, a second dog will need as much attention as the established dog, so if you don't have time for the first dog, you won't have time for another.

### **Commitment**

Are you willing to make a lifetime commitment to a dog? The average dog lives between 10 to 14 years; and in that time he will need regular veterinarian care, a commitment to exercise, and lots of love. Vet bills can add up to some formidable figures over the lifetime of a dog, so a realistic idea of this care should be considered.

### **Planning**

Have you given any thought to unforeseen problems that may arise during the course of a dog's life? What will you do with the dog during vacations or if you become ill? Is there a safe place or a responsible person you can rely upon in case of an emergency?

What about the dog as it ages? Will you still be able to care for your dog as he/she gets older and changes both physically and emotionally? Just like people, some dogs will change in personality, loose bladder and/or bowel control, have health problems, and are less playful as they age. Shelters have far too many older animals that were relinquished because the dog started "costing" money. There is nothing sadder than elderly dogs mourning for their owners after they have been left alone in such a frightening and unfamiliar place after years of devotion.

After you and your family have carefully considered all of these points, you should be ready to begin searching for a dog to add to your family. Make sure you receive input from everyone that will be involved with the dog, and bring along someone that will help you stick to your criteria. A cute puppy face or a wildly wagging tail has caught the eye of many potential adopters, only to turn into a disaster for the dog and family after the animal was unable to fit into a particular life-style.

Accepting your life-style limitations, understanding your motives, and choosing a dog that you have time to satisfy his or her instinctual elements requires some thought and planning, but bringing the "right" dog into your family will deliver a lifetime of love and devotion, and ultimately you will have the "perfect" dog for you.

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