



Choosing the "Right" Dog

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Most people come into a shelter with visions of adopting the "perfect" dog - one that is obedient, easy to care for, already housetrained, and will not interrupt the adopter's lifestyle. Of course, there is no such animal (unless it's a stuffed toy), but it is possible to find the "right" dog for most homes and living conditions if everyone is ready and willing to take the time to do their homework before making this life changing decision.

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." There are many considerations that should be examined before making this important and long-term decision. Many of those considerations are crucial to a dog's well-being and your satisfaction as the guardian of your new family member.

First and foremost, adopting a dog should be for the animal's entire lifetime. It is important to consider both what benefits a dog can bring into your life as well as the benefits that you can bring into the dog's life. A realistic look at the number of dogs that end up in shelters each year in the United States points toward unrealistic expectations by dog owners, so it is pivotal to consider both sides of the picture.

Next, adding an animal to your household should not be a hurried decision. Since the outcome will change the adopter's lifestyle, educated planning is necessary for the safety and happiness of both the adopter and the dog. Don't rush just to have a companion animal in your home; do your homework and research the different breeds as well as size, fur, and energy levels of dogs you would consider.

Of course, there are many environmental considerations, such as the size of homes, rules of condos and apartments and proper fencing, but finding the "right" dog for your household can be somewhat narrowed down to the looking at the following:

- Choose a dog that matches your lifestyle
- 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 also if you should be looking at all.

Breeds

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/her element the dog will be in your home with the time you are able to commit to the dog. 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, you may need to be very creative about getting the dog enough physical exercise and mental stimulation. A herding dog doesn't have to "herd" to be happy, but they will need things to do that direct all that intense energy and intelligence into appropriate behaviors. If not, boredom can set in, and the dog often "finds" something to do, usually with disastrous results, such as digging, barking, or eating the legs of furniture. When this "acting out" behavior happens, many times the dog is banished to the back yard or turned into a shelter, so careful planning about how to meet the dog's needs should be a consideration.

Time

The amount of time you have to devote to a dog should always be considered before making a 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.

Even an adult dog shouldn't be left alone or exiled to the yard for prolonged periods of time. Even though they have better control of their bladders and can be trusted longer, they are social animals. All dogs need quality interaction with their families if they are expected to be a well-behaved, happy dog.

Motive

If your children are your motivation for getting a dog, you have an even greater responsibility to the dog and the kids. 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 will 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 not trained otherwise. On the other hand, larger dogs tend to be less fragile and more stoic, so they may be able to withstand an occasional accidental step on a foot or tail.



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. Young children cannot be expected to give full-time care to a dog. This would be like allowing a youngster to take care of a baby full time. 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. Finally, think about the psychological impact that giving up a "problem dog" might have on your children. It sets the precedent to give up on an animal when encountering behaviors that can be remedied.

If your motive is to give an existing dog a companion, congratulations! Two dogs are very fun to have if you have the time and energy to manage, exercise and care for a multi-dog household. However, if you are thinking of adding a dog because your current dog is displaying negative behavior such as digging or barking, then you may just compound the problem. Adding another dog could double your trouble! If your dog recently began barking or digging and never had before, he is probably lonely or bored, but not for another dog –he wants you or your family's attention. 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. It's best to find the time your dog needs rather than expecting the problems to go away after a new dog is added. For ideas and solutions for your existing dog problems, be sure to call our Behavior Help line at 619-299-7012 Ext. 244, and our Behavior and Training experts will be glad to help you.

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 pet health insurance policy should be considered.

Altering your dog can help cut down on many expenses from problems such as mammary and other types of cancer associated with sexual maturity. Furthermore, in California, licensing agencies are required to offer discounts for altered animals. In San Diego County, you will save about \$150 over the average lifetime of the dog, which is more than enough to pay for the surgery.

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 it gets older and changes both physically and emotionally? Just like people, some dogs will change in personality, loose bladder and/or bowel control, develop health problems, and may be less playful as they age. Shelters have far too many older animals that are relinquished because the dog's care became too expensive or time consuming. There is nothing sadder than an aging dog mourning for his owners after they have left him alone in that unfamiliar place after years of devotion.

After you and your family have carefully considered all of these points, you are ready to begin searching for a dog to add to your family. However, it would be wise to first make a cooperative "want" list of the dog traits you find best fit with your lifestyle. 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 after the animal was unable to fit into a particular lifestyle.

Also be sure to talk to an experienced Adoption Counselor or someone from Behavior and Training Department before your final decision is made. They work with the dogs every day, and they can guide you toward a dog that will fit your criteria.

Knowing your lifestyle limitations, understanding your motives, and choosing a dog that won't be taken too far from of its instinctual element requires some thought and planning. Bringing the "right" dog into your family, however, will create a lifetime of love and devotion. Ultimately, the thoughtful consideration will be worth it, and you will always appreciate having found the "perfect" dog for you.

If you have a pet behavior question or would like some training assistance,
San Diego Humane Society is here to help!
Visit our website at www.sdhumane.org to view our behavior and training options,
or call our **Behavior Helpline** at **619-299-7012 ext. 2244** to speak with a trainer.