

## **Choosing the right dog for your family**

Choosing the right dog for your family is an important decision because he, or she, will become a member of your family. You want to make sure that this new dog is the right match for both your family and your lifestyle. No one ever wants to have to return a dog because the dog wasn't what they expected. Some dogs need more exercise than the owners can give, leading to behavior problems due to pent up energy. Other dogs need owners who are more firm and disciplined, which affects how efficiently the dog can be trained. In the end it winds up being terribly sad and traumatic for both the owner and the dog if the dog has to be rehomed. So what can you do to avoid this situation?

Chances are if you're purchasing a dog from a breeder, you've done your homework and researched the needs of the breed so you'll know what to expect. If you're adopting from your local animal shelter, or from a rescue organization, which I always recommend, it becomes more difficult because we tend to fall in love with them based on their looks. To complicate matters, many of them are mixed-breed dogs so we couldn't even look up their specific breed characteristics if we wanted to. So what can you do to help choose the right dog for your family? Here are several things to think about in advance of visiting the shelter, or searching the rescue organizations website:

1. Is this my first dog/how long has it been since I had a dog? Some breeds are higher maintenance than others and need to attend basic obedience training classes if the adopter does not have the skills to train them. Puppies are very high maintenance at first, especially because they have to be housetrained (we tend to forget this because they're so cute!). An older, lower maintenance dog may be better for the first time dog owner, and for those dogs that only need some basic obedience training.
2. My dog needs to be around young children, the elderly, other dogs, cats, or other non-domesticated animals (e.g. rabbits, hamsters, ferrets). Some big dogs can be clumsy around young children and the elderly. Older dogs that haven't been socialized with other species may be aggressive towards them. Safety for all family members, including other pets, must be considered first.
3. My dog will spend more time with me indoors on the couch, or will spend more time outdoors in the yard playing with me and the kids, on the boat with us, swimming, or even out running with me. If you want a "couch potato" dog, that's fine. Look for a dog who's laid back, perhaps older than the age of 5. If you want an active, playful dog find one with a lot of energy and physically capable of a lot of activity (not all dogs are capable of rigorous activity).
4. Finally, ask yourself how long your new dog will be left alone per day while you're out working. Puppies need attention every 2-3 hours to be let out during housetraining so if you're going to spend a lot of time away from home, consider an older dog.

After considering these questions, you can then begin your search. Most shelters and rescue organizations are familiar with the dogs up for adoption. Your responses will help the staff pair you up with a dog who's well-suited to your needs, and of course the needs of the dog!

Barbara Pezzanite, Ph.D., CPDT-KA  
Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist