

## Choosing the “Right” Dog

Thinking of getting a dog to make your family complete? Are you ready for a companion who gazes adoringly into your eyes, his undying devotion there for the whole world to see? Are you ready for a companion who curls up with you on the white couch, shedding her black doggy hair everywhere? Are you ready for 3 a.m. potty breaks, and a companion who chews your \$100 running shoes because he’s angry that you’re not using them with him? If you think you’re truly ready for a dog, keep reading. If you’re frightened at the prospect of owning a dog after reading this far, go rent Beethoven and Turner & Hooch and see what a dog can do. Then heave a deep sigh of relief that you have managed to avoid the pitfall that millions of Americans fall into; dog ownership. Those of us with dogs will watch those movies and think, “My dog could do way better than that!” And that actually makes us happy. Ready to let yourself into our world? Read on for some helpful tips to make sure the dog you choose is the best match for your family.

Whether you’re thinking of purchasing or adopting that sad-eyed puppy, or that even sadder-eyed adult, there are a few things you need to ask yourself.

### **Does everyone in the family like dogs?**

While this may seem like a no-brainer, children are often frightened by rambunctious pooches with sharp puppy teeth and toe-nails that can cut like a knife, a dull one, but a knife none the less.

### **Does anyone in the home suffer from allergies?**

While there are certain breeds that are less allergy inducing than others, such as Bichon Frises, Portuguese Water Dogs, and Poodles, it is important that every member of the family interacts with as many friendly dogs as possible to determine if there any allergic reactions. If mom’s eyes swell shut every time she gets near a furry dog, getting that new dog may be a little more difficult.

### **How much time do you have to give a pet, both for fun and recreation, and training as well?**

While many dog owners may joke that they like the dog better than the kids because you can put the dog in a crate and go out, a dog is still a VERY large time commitment. A bored dog is generally a destructive dog, and even a Chihuahua can put the hurtin’ on your new leather couch, shoes and rugs.

### **How attached are you to that couch, those shoes, the rugs?**

Dogs are dogs, and do doggy things. When a puppy is teething, generally from three to nine months of age, they chew. And sometimes, no matter how many dog toys there are, something you wear, or lay on, or walk on, just smells better and becomes the new chew toy.

### **Are you financially prepared to own a dog?**

The average cost for owning a healthy adult dog is about \$600 to \$750 per year. If you have a clumsy or accident-prone pooch, or one with health problems, that amount can easily triple! Add in the cost of those chewed up shoes, some real dog toys, a new leash and collar, and that “free to good home” pooch has just cost you a mortgage payment!

### **How do you feel about dog poop, dog pee, and dog vomit?**

Even the best-behaved dog can have accidents, especially if they’re not feeling well. And those accidents, statistically speaking, will occur directly in the center of your white Oriental rug.

Still ready for a dog? Great! Now start looking! Visit animal shelters, humane societies, pounds, rescue groups, breeders, even check the classified section of the local newspaper. But please, don't go to a pet store and buy a puppy-mill pup. The reasons for this are too numerous to get into here, but if you have any questions, check out the web for information on puppy mills, and you'll see why you shouldn't help perpetuate this terrible practice!

Don't rush into choosing a dog immediately. Take your time; it's not a race. This dog should be with you for many, many years to come (some of the smaller breeds can live to 20 years old!), why rush a decision like this? How long did it take you to pick your spouse? If you're thinking of buying or rescuing a purebred dog, read up on the breed. Go to dog shows, meet dogs, and talk to the owners. Make sure this breed is the right match for your family. All purebred dogs were created to perform a specific task. Even Toy breeds like the Chihuahua and the Silky Terrier were bred to be little, cute, and sit in your lap. Even mix-breeds can exhibit some of the personality traits of the dominant breed. If you come home from work every night and crash on the couch, if pushing the button on the T.V. remote is tiring, then that Border Collie you've always dreamed of may become a nightmare. If hiking ten miles a day in sun, snow and fog is your idea of a fun time, that Pug mix that you rescued from the local shelter may pack his bags and go back.

Decide on the age of dog most appropriate for your family. The ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) officially recommends that children be at least six years of age before getting a puppy. An older dog who has lived successfully with children may be a better choice. Adult dogs are often current on vaccinations, already spayed or neutered, housebroken, and are through the teething/ destructive phase. An older dog may have had some obedience training, and may not require as much exercise as an energetic pup. No matter what the age of the dog, it is extremely important that an adult supervise all interactions between dogs and children, especially when the dog is first introduced to the family. Children need to be taught respect for a dog, and appropriate ways to handle a dog. Even the friendliest dog may snap if a child hurts them, even if was accidental. It is never cute or appropriate to let children pull on a dog's ears or tail, or to jump and climb on them.

Always keep an open mind when looking for a dog. Did you know that studies show people often pick their dogs because they thought it had a cute face? Or because they remember a dog just like it from when they were young children? It's certainly more important to pick a dog based on temperament and personality, rather than size, sex, breed, or color. When you are meeting the dog for the first time, observe the dog's body language. Since a dog can't tell you in words how it feels, it's important to look at things like ear position, eye contact, and tail position. If the dog is cowering in the corner with his ears held back, tail tucked between his legs, and he won't make eye contact, this is a dog who is frightened. He may continue to exhibit this personality in a new home, and would not do well in a loud, rowdy house where children are running everywhere. Look for a dog who comes forward to you with his ears forward, wearing a happy "smile" and a wagging tail. Listen to the barks they dog may use. Are they loud, happy barks that say, "take me!" or are they short, aggressive-sounding barks that say, "stay away"? Ask the caretaker what the dog's previous experiences were. If the dog goes directly to your children, virtually ignoring the adults, this could be your perfect family pet. Watch the dog's body language as she interacts with the members of the family. If she shys away from the children, it is probably better to look at a different dog. If the dog is playing with a toy and is perfectly willing to let you take that toy from her mouth, she may be a keeper. If you approach him while he has a toy, and he growls or curls his lips at you, if his body tenses, and the hair rises on his hackles, or if he snaps at your hand, this is definitely a dog to avoid. Food or toy possession, also called resource guarding, is one of the leading reasons that a dog bites children. While an adult may be able to read these signals, a child is less likely to interpret them correctly, and may push the dog too far.

While there are plenty of dogs out there looking for new homes, it is important to remember that not every dog will meet your family's criteria as the perfect pet. Take your time making the decision; don't bend under to pressure from the kids. Remember, most of the responsibility for the dog's care will end up settled firmly on the parent's shoulders. Always remember that a dog is a living thing, and requires lots of love, patience and understanding. The perfect dog for your family is out there; you just have to take your time in finding it. Best of luck in your search, and when you finally do get your Lassie, the rewards will be unbelievable!

*Respectfully submitted by Tonya Rivers, ACO New London Police Department*