

How to Choose Your Puppy

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Let us assume you have isolated the group of puppies from which you want to make your selection. They could be within the confines of a large cage at a shelter or in a room in the breeder's home. Remember, as you try to make your selection, just as every person is different, so are dogs. Your goal is choosing a particular puppy that matches your image of the perfect dog. Many authors and dog fanciers emphatically believe that it is impossible to judge an adult dog's personality or abilities from his behavior as a puppy. One of our close friends, Delmar Smith, is a very famous dog trainer. He once visited the Queen of England's kennel. It is renowned for producing numerous field and obedience champions. Delmar asked the senior resident trainer responsible for the majority of these wins about his method of consistently picking puppies that would be future winners. The old gentleman smiled and simply replied that he let everyone else pick the pups they wanted and then worked with whatever was left. He believed that through 7 to 10 weeks of age, all puppies were equal.



We would agree that it is far from an exact science, but most people who involve their lives around dogs believe there are better methods than relying on some form of random selection. Most of us do not want a puppy that will mature into an overly aggressive animal. Neither do we want one that is excessively timid or shy. We want a dog that will be reasonably easy to train, cause little damage to our home and friends, and adapt well to our family and household.

Observing behavior

Spending a little time with a group of puppies and being observant can usually help to isolate those with good, outgoing personalities. They will be in the midst of puppy play, being neither overly dominant nor submissive. If you crouch down, friendly pups will usually run to your feet. When picked up and supported well, they normally will not fight or struggle to get down. Ask yourself some obvious questions. Does the puppy seem to enjoy being with people? Is he overly afraid of stimuli such as sounds or sudden movement? Most of this is common sense, and can be done by anybody without any preconceived ideas. Anything is better than saying simply, "I want a brown one with lots of spots."

There have been books and articles written on puppy selection. Some are very good, while others seem to lead readers down a long and difficult path. Most good methods use a testing procedure that measures the puppy's responses to some sort of stimuli. This attempts to eliminate most subjectivity.

We feel that there are two very good and useful books on this subject. They are straightforward and easy to use. One is written by the Monks of New Skete and is titled "The Art of Raising a Puppy" and the other is Clarice Rutherford and David Neil's book, "How to Raise a Puppy You Can Live With." They both explain and guide you through an evaluation system of the individual animal's personality. Both books also give an excellent treatment on the behavioral development of dogs through their first year of life. We would strongly recommend them to any prospective puppy owner.



Although we endorse these methods, remember that they only judge the puppy on that particular day during one stage in his life. Findings done on another day could vary significantly. Keep in mind also that the environment in which the animal lives and matures will greatly affect his behavior and personality as an adult. This means that you will have an opportunity to affect the puppy after he is living with you. The more time you spend with your new friend, the better chance you have of him growing into the animal you want. Regardless of the test or selection method used, you cannot expect the animal to continue to develop without your guidance.

The mystical seven weeks of age

You have picked out your puppy and paid the bill. It is six weeks of age and you want the puppy now! However, the breeder says you can not take it home for seven more days. They say they always keep the puppies with the mother and littermates until they are 49 days of age. Exactly seven weeks! While you may be mad or disappointed, in our opinion, you are very lucky. You are working with a breeder who is worried more about doing what is right for the dog than getting out of an additional week of puppy cleaning duties.

It may seem very subjective, but it has been shown by several animal behaviorists that this is what is best for the puppy. They should stay within their litter situation until they are 49 days of age and then immediately go to their new homes. Through seven weeks of age, the pups are still gaining from the interaction with their mother and littermates. This will help the puppy later in life when she is confronted by other dogs. Being in the presence of her littermates gives the puppy more confidence when she encounters new experiences. These could be anything from a loud noise, fences that need to be climbed over or through, a large object like a tree or the sound and sensation of the wind in her face.

The puppy still needs to be around people. That will never change. In fact, it is very important for a six-week-old puppy. If the breeder does not have young children play with the puppy or is running short on time, you should plan on spending time at the kennel during the next few days if it is at all possible. Your responsibilities started the day you said you wanted that puppy.