How to Choose the 'Right' Type of Dog for You

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You have decided that you want to bring a dog into your life. You realize the commitment that you are making. You are willing to invest the time, energy, and money necessary to make this relationship work for you and your future dog. With those decisions behind you there are lots of questions left to answer. In choosing the type of dog you want, you need to consider your specific needs and lifestyle, the space you have, and your activity level. The breed, age, and sex of the dog will also be important factors in your decision.

The American Kennel Club recognizes over 150 breeds and there are many different shapes and styles of mixed breeds. So which one should you get? In some instances, your individual needs or lifestyle may guide you to your choice. Other people may have fewer restrictions and they are able to choose from a wide range of breeds without making a mistake.

You also need to consider whether you want to start with a puppy or an adult dog. Both have advantages and disadvantages. Usually, the time you have available combined with what you want in a dog should help you to make this last decision.

What characteristics should your new dog have?

The dog you select should be one that closely fits your lifestyle and what you perceive your needs to be. To say there is one and only one correct dog for an individual just is not so.

Will Your Dog Have a Specific Purpose? The first, and most important, question you must ask yourself is what purpose your new canine companion will hopefully serve in your life. Some may acquire the animal to satisfy very specific needs. He may be used as a hunting partner in the field, a guard to protect the home through barking or his aggressive appearance or behavior, a playmate and learning experience for children, etc. In most homes, however, the dog's role will simply be that of companionship. That is to say, he will be a four-legged friend that you enjoy being with regardless of your activity.

Every specific use or role for a dog comes with other subsets of choices. Individuals obtaining a dog for bird hunting must choose animals that are best suited for their type of hunting. Will it be for the upland field where a dog will be moving through cover all day? Some of these breeds will point the approximate location of the game (English Pointer); others will attempt to flush the bird into flight (English Springer Spaniel), while others are along for the retrieve. Some are commonly asked both to hunt for birds in the upland fields and to retrieve in water.

Some animals used to guard a home or business from intruders only need to bark and a Poodle or Bichon Frise may suffice. They are telling whoever might be out there that it is impossible to enter the building quietly. Other dogs in the protection field display an intimidating appearance. Few breeds fill this bill better than a Doberman Pinscher or Rottweiler. Other dogs that work in actual law enforcement capacities must sometimes be able to truly depend and protect with their physical abilities. This will probably mean a large dog that has the ability to knock a man off his feet.

If the dog is acquired for companionship alone, he can come with an infinitely wide range of characteristics as to size, hair coat, general appearance, and behavior. Almost any member of the canine species regardless of his lineage would be acceptable.

Does Size Make a Difference? In our practice we have as a client an eighty-year-old, 110-pound lady. Some might say that when choosing a canine companion, because of her physical structure, she should restrict herself to a lap dog. In her case, nothing would be farther from the truth. Although she has no background as a professional dog trainer, she and her 100-pound male Rottweiler get along perfectly with her always being in control. At the other end of the spectrum, we have 220-pound men that have difficulty handling their 15-pound mixed breed. People vary greatly in their ability to train and care for dogs. Their physical size, age, intelligence, financial worth, or occupation are factors, but their ability to train a dog is far more important.

Remember that larger breeds will cost more overall due to increase in food consumption, larger crates and beds needed, larger size toys, and increased cost for surgery and medicine.

What is Your Activity Level? Your activity level dictates to a certain degree what type of a dog will best fit with you. A jogger can handle almost any breed providing the dog can keep up with him. A backpacker that hopes his four-legged friend can carry part of the weight needs a strong but not necessarily large counterpart. An elderly person that wants a lap dog certainly would not choose a Saint Bernard.

How much Space Do You Have? The amount of space available to the pet should also be considered as it relates to the activity level and overall size of the dog. Someone who has a rural home surrounded by 80 acres can probably accommodate any breed, while the person living in a fifth floor, one room apartment may not want a 200-pound Great Dane. Please understand that over ninety percent of the dogs owned by Americans today are housedogs, i.e., they spend the vast majority of their life within the owner's home. If this will be your situation, look at your home and yard and be realistic about the amount of exercise your pet can achieve within those confines. Remember that before they partnered with us, dogs in their natural state spent all of their time outside. They led very active lives and only a few of those living with us today have given up very

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much of their natural desire for exercise.

A small, active dog is obviously easier to accommodate than a large one, but sometimes size will be found to be a moderator of behavior. A Yorkshire Terrier may seem to, and probably does, go ninety-miles-per-hour all day long. However, adults of one of the giant breeds like a Saint Bernard typically sleep 16 to 18 hours a day. That is why some larger breeds often do so well in apartments or smaller homes – as long as exercise is provided in the form of long walks or runs in the dog park on a daily basis.

How much Grooming Are You Willing to Do? Most dogs with longer hair coats need more care. Longhaired dogs are usually a disaster if they are outside in long grass, weeds, or brush. Their coats become matted and filled with everything they can snare. This may entail special grooming and frequent trimming, brushing, or baths. Some owners enjoy keeping their pet looking her best, while others consider it a burdensome chore. In either case, while this may not be a problem while the animal is a puppy, later in life, she will require additional time or expenses from the owner.

Is the Sex of the Dog Important to You? Many future pet owners take little consideration into whether they get a male or female.

Is the Age of the Dog Important to You? For most prospective owners, getting a dog means bringing home a two-month-old puppy. This is a decision that you need to think through carefully. For some first-time dog owners a puppy may be the worst possible choice.

There are disadvantages in starting out with a puppy versus an adult dog. It is always more difficult to determine the ultimate personality of any dog when he is evaluated during his first few weeks of life. Remember that if we use the old adage about one year in a dog's life is equal to seven or more years in that of a human, then a seven-week-old puppy you may be looking at is approximately a year old in human terms. Anyone would admit that it is nearly impossible to judge a human's personality from what you are seeing as they lie in their crib.

Many experienced dog fanciers and trainers would remind us that this is a two-edged sword. While we may not be able to predict the future personality of the puppy, by starting with a dog of this age we will be able to have a greater effect on his development and ultimate behavior. Dogs are just like people in that many traits of their personality are a result of their genetic background. However, they are also a product of their surroundings. A puppy that finds himself in a loving home with lots of attention will probably turn out much differently than a littermate that was tied to a tree in the backyard and whose only exposure to humans comes in a once-a-day feeding. By choosing a puppy, you have the potential to have a much greater effect on the dog's personality than if you started with an adult.

Selecting a puppy versus an adult typically means you will spend a lot more time in training. That includes everything from housebreaking through leash training and verbal commands. Additionally, puppies have to grow through some less-than-delightful phases such as eating shoes, chewing on everything in sight, frequent trips to the veterinarian for vaccinations and wormings, additional expenses for neutering, and so on. The selection of an adult dog bypasses most of these. Without exception, dogs take a lot more of your time during their first year of life. To many, this is the best part and they love the involvement – other potential owners simply struggle to find the extra time.

Puppies, even with all their additional requirements, are usually more expensive to purchase. There simply is a greater demand for them. They are cute, very appealing bundles of joy and in America it has become the typical method of acquiring a new dog. Many breeders have a long waiting list of prospective buyers. Older dogs on the other hand are often given up because their owners discovered they could not give the time required or realized that having a dog was not for them. Adults are not as cute as puppies and the market for them is much smaller. Typically, they do not command high prices. In fact, many go "free to a good home."

There are several advantages in choosing an older dog versus a puppy. One is the predictability of what you will have in the future. The model you will have for the next several years is standing right in front of you. You can judge his temperament, size, whether he will shed excessively or not, etc. Additionally, with the help of your veterinarian, you can determine if he has any medical problems such as hip dysplasia. With a puppy, we can sometimes only guess if conditions such as these will develop later in his life, but when examining an adult, most of these problems have already reached a diagnosable stage even if the animal is not yet showing signs. Ideally, the breeder or current owner of an adult dog would allow you to take the adult on a two-week trial basis to see if the dog will work out in your household, and take the dog back with no questions asked if things do not work out during that time.

Do You Want a Purebred or Mixed-Breed Dog? Should your new dog be a purebred or a mixed breed? For many, the answer to this question is obvious because subconsciously they are only thinking about purebred dogs. The thought of having anything else never even enters their mind. When they were growing up, their parents had English Setters so they automatically look for an English Setter.

It is ironic that many future dog owners seek out a purebred without any idea of what breed they might want. They never consider a mixed or "Heinz 57." Before you leap into a selection between the 150 or so currently listed and officially recognized breeds, you need to understand the differences and pros and cons of a "canine blue-blood" versus what is often referred to as a mixed breed.

There are differences between purebred and mixed breed dogs, but they are mostly in what the buyer wants or perceives. Several hundred years ago humans started with wild or free-roaming canines and brought them into their lives. Originally, they were used to help us with our work. In various parts of the world, different basic models as to shape and size were used

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for these initial transformations into domestication. Over the years, dogs have become less important as a working partner and most are simply thought of as a companion. Regardless of their role in our world, from the very start, we have continually tried to alter the dog's abilities, behavior, size, shape, color, conformation, etc., to fit some purpose or goal that we had. This was done through selective breeding. At some point in time, a standard is established and these animals are sanctioned as a unique breed. With the stroke of a pen on an official looking document, they are transformed from a mixed breed to a purebred.

Possible advantages of purebreds: If you are seeking a dog and need it for a specific purpose, you may be better off choosing a purebred that has been selectively bred with those traits in mind. While it is often said that any dog can be trained to do anything, you may be wiser to use the years of experience and efforts of others than try to start on your own. For example, someone who is interested in herding, hunting, scent work, or other specific tasks would be better off choosing a dog from one of the breeds that have been devoted to those specialized fields. Through generations of selective breeding, these traits have been refined and strengthened well past those found in the general population of dogs.

For some people, their choice as to which dog they should get is based on their own physical makeup or problems. If a respiratory condition means you should not be around dogs that shed excessively, you should select a breed that is appropriate for your own health. Certain kinds of dogs are well known for their non-shedding characteristics. In reality, they do shed, but generally much less than typical breeds. Examples are the various Poodles and Schnauzers. In these situations in which a specific physical trait such as the amount that an animal sheds is important in your dog, it is probably better to choose a purebred. It would be very difficult, if not impossible to predict, the degree of shedding that a mixed breed puppy will display as an adult.

Some dog owners find certain dogs more attractive than others and simply must have one that looks like that. It would be foolish for them to choose a different breed or one of mixed lineage. If someone knows what they want their dog to look like as an adult, but are starting with a puppy, they need to choose a member of that breed to ensure they get what they want a year later.

Some dog breeds are known for having certain personalities or behavior patterns. You can select one that matches yours or what you would prefer to see in your pet. Golden Retrievers are known for their laid-back, calm personalities. To some, that is the perfect dog. Others, however, would prefer a more out going, excitable dog. Still, others might want an animal for protection of their home. Certain lines of some breeds have been bred for this type of work and are therefore a natural choice.

An excellent book that describes the various breeds is "The Complete Dog Book" by the American Kennel Club. It can be found in most book or pet stores. Buying a purebred animal in no way guarantees what you will get. It may increase your chances of matching you with your goal, but that is all.

Some advantages of mixed breeds: Keep in mind when thinking about purebred dogs that many man-made alterations in the basic structure and behavior from the original historical canine model have brought along some disadvantages. Some dogs, especially those with short noses that at times seem to be pushed back into their heads, may have difficulty breathing or giving birth to their puppies naturally. Excessively large or giant breeds usually have shorter life spans, often by several years. Breeds with excessive skin folds are generally more prone to bacterial skin infections.

In other purebreds, harmful or unwanted characteristics have arisen. Whenever breeders select for one trait they may unknowingly select for many others. Hip dysplasia is a degenerative and often severely debilitating disease of the hip joint of dogs. It is transmitted from one generation to the next through genetics. This condition is rare in wild dogs. Any condition that decreases the overall ability of a wild animal to compete in their world is quickly eliminated through natural selection. However, through human engineered selective processes, this condition has become common in several breeds. Breeding has, it would seem, unknowingly potentiated the genetically transferred information that controls this disease. Today, concerned and ethical breeders work very hard to eliminate undesirable traits from their breeds. They truly care about the animals they produce and their future.

When considering your choice between a purebred and mixed breed, do not forget the cost. Purebred puppies have been known to cost $300 to $3000 depending on the particular lines and breed. Mixed breed models are usually free or go for only a small adoption fee. In some households, this can mean the difference between getting a dog or not. We promise you, the child that receives his first puppy will rarely care about his color, hair coat, size, or the price paid.

Summary

The dog you bring home will hopefully be a part of your life for many years. For this partnership to be the best for both of you, it is important you make the right choice.

If you feel you do not have the knowledge to make these decisions, talk to dog breeders, trainers, veterinarians, and other pet owners. All people, whether they are specialists or not, love to talk about their animals and there is a wealth of information available just for the asking. Read as much as you can about the different types or breeds of dogs. We have been brief here, but 99% of the breeds listed by the American Kennel Club have several books devoted just to them. Today, there are also hundreds and hundreds of good books and magazine articles dealing with every phase of pet ownership.

Sometime in this process take time to consider the needs of the dog. Consider your surroundings and lifestyle. Make sure the dog fits into the environment you will be able to provide. Remember the word relationship and how it is a two way street with

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each party making both commitments and compromises. In this case, the majority of these burdens will fall on your shoulders. And that is fair because you are the one who gets to make all the choices.

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