

Popular Dogs: Australian Shepherds

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Australian Shepherds are often perceived as cat chasers and troublemakers. In reality, an Aussie can make a loyal, fun and active pet, but it takes the right family to develop a potentially rewarding relationship. Raising an Australian Shepherd involves patience, time and commitment. It doesn't come easy and requires a few golden rules.

Bringing home a new Aussie pup or adult dog can bring unexpected chaos for their owners and existing pets. However, countless people, perhaps even you, have experienced the positive benefits an Aussie has on families with other dogs, cats, children and friends. With the help of some rules, your personal menagerie can co-exist in peace with an Aussie add-on.

Contrary to the problematic portrayal of unruly Aussies, this herding breed can become a well-adjusted dog inside and outside your home. "This is a commitment that, for both of you to be happy, takes some time and effort on your part," says Pam Bethurum, owner of Adelaide Australian Shepherds Kennel in Springfield, Calif. Bethurum is an Aussie breeder and owner for 30 years and Australian Shepherd Club of America (ASCA) education coordinator.

Australian Shepherd experts say you can help solve family relationship problems by heeding the following recommendations.

Basic Aussies 101

It's back to the basics-Aussie basics, that is. It's time to hit the books and the Internet for Australian Shepherd resources. Check out your local bookstore for books such as "Australian Shepherds: Everything about Purchase, Care, Nutrition, Behavior and Training" by Caroline D. Coile, (Barron's Educational Series, 1999; \$6.95) and "A New Owner's Guide to Australian Shepherds" by Joseph Hartnagle (TFH, 1997; \$9.95).

Log on to the ASCA's website: www.asca.org. You'll get a handle on registering your dog, adopting an Aussie rescue and much more. In addition, attend a few ASCA or AKC dog events to see Aussies in action-up close and personal. Befriend Australian Shepherd breeders, too. "Spend some time researching the breeder you decide to work with," suggests Nanette Newbury, of Stonepine Australian Shepherds Kennel in Salinas, Calif. "They will become an integral part of your life when introducing your new dog or puppy into your home. Make sure the breeder will have time for you after the sale is over."

A bonus tip: "Find out as much as you can about the temperament of the parents and the condition the pups are raised in," suggests Bethurum. Also, inquire about health guarantees (for issues such as hip dysplasia and eye problems) to protect you and your new dog.

Choose A Good Vet

After you've chosen your Aussie, it's time to choose a good vet; one that is Australian Shepherd or herding-breed savvy is your best bet. Schedule a complete exam and required shots. At your first visit inquire about a diet plan-and stick to it. Following your vet's suggestions will help ensure you maintain a healthy and happy dog. Later, a good health plan will give you peace of mind regarding any problems, from pesky fleas to weight issues.

Socialize Early

Make sure your new Aussie is exposed to different people, places and pets as early as possible. Early socialization will help to build a confident attitude in your pup.

When adding a new Aussie to your pack, make sure introductions are done slowly. Jan Strother, D.V.M., of Hartselle, Ala., recommends these steps to help relieve the pressure:

1. Perform first encounters in a neutral room, so your dog or other pet(s) don't feel as if they are defending their territory.

2. You may want to put the newcomer in a crate at first to help acclimate it to the household.
3. Ten minutes of contact is advised, then take a break; stay within this time range during the following two or three encounters.
4. Separation will minimize barking and outright brawls as well as lessen anxiety and boost confidence.
5. Once introductions are made, supervise all interaction until you're convinced your Aussie and other pets and people are friendly and unafraid. Then, decrease your supervision gradually.

We all know the basic formula for creating dog and cat soul mates: Start the bonding process when the animals are young, insist on mutual respect and know each pet's limitations. If there is any friction between age-different Aussies and cats (such as a playful puppy and sensitive senior cat) don't take chances. Keep the pets apart while unsupervised. There are a few fast rules to boosting the relationship between your Aussie and cat:

1. Avoid pet jealousy. Give each pet equal attention during play and share praise or treats when a dog and cat are together to prevent rivalry.
2. Stick to house rules. Both dogs and cats thrive on consistency, so apply discipline as equally as possible.
3. Keep dog and cat treats on hand. Make sure both your dog and cat have their own treats and toys to stave off confusion or squabbles.

Enroll in Obedience Training

Aussie experts claim the primary reasons that people lose control of this breed are twofold: aggressiveness and activity level. With proper training you can stay in charge of your Australian Shepherd. Begin puppy kindergarten first. When your pup is 6 months old enroll it in an obedience class. An Australian Shepherd-savvy instructor is best. One year of obedience classes is recommended. "Most Aussies are easily trained and have a strong desire to please. If you decide to put your dog through higher levels of obedience training and trials, you will find the Aussie is generally tough competition," says Bethurum.