

How to Select a Puppy That's Right for You

How to pick a puppy that is compatible with your home and family.

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Would you choose a bride for her large, mournful eyes? A mate because his appearance deters criminals? How about a friend because her coloring matches your furniture?

You wouldn't. But sometimes dog owners base the crucial decision of buying a puppy on looks and other skin-deep criteria.

It's the "doggie in the window" syndrome. A wagging tail or adorable movie pup catches your eye. The next minute, you're taking it home. Within five minutes - poof! - your consummate canine companion has mutated into a mischievous mongrel, devouring your Louis Vuitton handbag or shredding the remote control.

What went wrong? Many things, the most important being you acted on impulse. A better way to select a puppy is to rely on honest self-analysis and careful research long before you buy.

Only after you have all the information - how to select a breeder or shelter, choose a breed, pick a puppy and decide on an obedience trainer, to name a few topics - should you look at litters. Then you will be able to pick the perfect pet and start building a lifelong friendship.

You've decided you want a dog. Why? Do you need a hunting partner? Are you housebound and want a companion? Do the kids need a protector and playmate? You may have many wonderful, legitimate reasons to get a dog - love, security, devotion. In return, dogs need the same from you. The first step in choosing a puppy begins with self-analysis, considering your lifestyle and your expectations of a dog. For the first question, you must be brutally honest. It will determine whether a dog is the right pet for you. How much time do you have for a dog?

Dogs are social and need to be around other dogs or people. They also need structure and discipline. Many classic behavioral problems, such as digging or chewing, result from dogs spending too much time alone. Dogs become bored when their owners aren't around, so they entertain themselves. Plus, training takes patience and time. Professionals can handle some challenges like obedience training, but owners must still learn the skills they need to handle a dog.

"I ask people what they know about my breed," said Michelle Hutchinson, a Jack Russell Terrier breeder in Sun City, Ariz. "If they don't have sufficient time, they and their homes are going to be worse for wear."

You decide you do have the time. The next question: What do you want from a dog? Do you need a jogging partner? A lapdog to brush and primp? A lovable mutt to hike with your family?