

Choosing a Dog

Where should I begin?

The idea of having a dog has been rolling around in your head for a while. Maybe the kids have been bugging you since forever! Maybe you're single and think it would be nice to have another living creature around. Whatever the reason, it seems a dog is in your future. Now what?

Well, you need to give some serious thought to what your current life style is, how it might change in the future and whether the care and feeding of a dog will complement and enhance that lifestyle.

There is a time commitment. Dog lifespans can be 12-15 years. They require daily attention (exercise, feeding) and maintenance (picking up poop).

There is also a financial commitment as dogs require yearly vaccinations and some breeds require regular visits to a groomer. Dog training classes are another likely expense. There is also the possibility that your dog may require some expensive medical treatment during his lifetime.

And there is a socio/emotional commitment. Dogs are social creatures which means they want and need social interactions with their pack members. Leaving a dog in the yard or garage away from his pack (you and your family) will not fulfill the social commitment.

What do I need to consider when choosing a dog?

Getting home from work: How do you feel when you get home from work? Do you need to chill out, or can you move right on to the dog walk? One walk a day is a *minimum* requirement. More active, younger dogs will require more exercise, chasing a ball or perhaps running in a field. Will you be up for it? Do you want a dog that "goes crazy" when you get home, or would you prefer a mellower greeting?

Typical evening at your home: What does your typical evening look like? Are there kids, homework or other activities to take care of? Will children be playing with the dog? If so, they must be supervised. Do you like to chill out on the couch and do you want your dog nearby chilling also? Where will the dog sleep? Will he sleep with the kids, you, on your bed, on his own bed, in a crate?

Typical weekend at your home: What kind of activities are a part of your weekend? Going to your kids' various activities? Will the dog be able to attend? Do you like hiking/walking? Will you bring the dog? Will the dog be home alone on weekends while you are out and about?

Providing for the dog's needs: Now you need to think about how you will be able to accommodate the dog's needs. If your dog will be home alone for most of the day the big question to think about is: Where will the dog stay?

Inside: Will your dog have access to the whole house? (Not recommended.) Are you ready and willing to "dog proof" your house? Dog proofing means you will put things out of reach that you don't want the dog to get. Will he have access to outside via a dog door? Will someone come and let the dog out? Dogs shouldn't be confined for more than 4-5 hours without a bathroom break.

Outside: Do you have a yard? Is it secure? Will the dog have access to the whole yard? What if the dog digs up parts of the yard? Can the dog see people walking by? Visual stimuli will often cause barking. Is there shelter available for protection from cold, rain or heat? What happens if neighbors complain about constant barking?

Exercise: Dogs do not self-exercise so no matter how big your yard is your dog will still need a walk or other exercise with you or another person. Is your yard big enough that you and your dog can play fetch or run around together?

Dog Parks: Are you thinking of going to a dog park? Think carefully! Dog parks are not the exercise answer for many dogs. Some dogs (not just small dogs) get very afraid of all the action and running around that occurs in dog parks. Other dogs get too excited and start chasing and getting out of control. If you plan on using a dog park, be very aware of what is going on at all times and be ready to step in to control a situation involving your dog. It is not a good idea to “let the dogs work it out”. Will you be willing to step in? (Please review our **Canine Social Scene** handout.)

Puppies, Adolescents, and Adults – Oh My! Generally speaking puppies and young dogs will require more attention, training and structure than older dogs (over 4). Younger dogs (Adolescents) are reproductively mature, but they are still growing and are very likely to be more active. It will be very important that these dogs get their full measure of adequate, daily exercise! A tired dog is a good dog! Are you ready to make that happen?

Where can I find more information?

So many dogs, so many choices! How do you find out what breed of dog might be a good match for you?

Knowing the characteristics of pure bred dogs can help you decide on what you want or don't want in a dog. Even if you are not getting a pure bred, knowing the characteristics can help you when looking at the mixed breeds. (Please review our **Dog Breed Characteristics and Behavior** handout.)

Animal Planet and **American Kennel Club** have dog selection tools available to all. Dog breeds are divided into many different categories such as “Family dog breeds,” “Energetic dog breeds,” or “Breeds for apartment dwellers” to help you narrow down the search. After you choose the category you are interested in, you can browse through the matching dog breeds and find out information about size, temperament, and any special care or grooming needs and even a little history about the breed.

The American Kennel Club: www.akc.org/dog-breeds/
Animal Planet: www.animalplanet.com/dog-breed-selector/

Where can I find the right dog?

Pure Bred Dogs: Pure bred dogs have particular characteristics that breeders select for. These characteristics are what make that breed special. For example, border collies are herding dogs. So they are bred to have a high prey drive so they will chase after their herd. They can bark a lot to control and direct the herd and they also will nip at the feet of the herded animals to get them to go the right way.



Internet: We do not recommend purchasing a dog sight unseen over the internet. Puppy mills proliferate online and often sell sick, injured or behaviorally compromised puppies who have been raised under inhumane conditions. Puppy mills often masquerade as legitimate breeders. Be prepared to interview breeders regarding their puppies' early socialization, and ask if you can meet and visit with the puppy's parents. We recommend that you take the extra time and effort to visit the kennels and dogs.

Mixed Breeds and Shelters: About 80% of dogs in shelters are mixed breeds. To find a forever home for even just one dog is considered a victory for the people who care for shelter dogs.

Most likely there is a shelter near you. You will have an abundance of choices right there for you to look at, touch, play with and get to know! There will be big and small dogs; dogs with floppy ears or pointy ears and sometimes one of each; dogs with long, bushy tails or no tail; dogs of all different colors and shapes and personalities. Surely you will find your match!

When you do find your match, there will be people who will answer any questions and help you in any way possible. And best of all, they will still be there in a week, or 2, or a month later if something comes up and you need some advice. So consider a shelter dog!

These webpages have more information about shelter dogs and mixed breeds:

Shelter Dogs: www.dogtime.com/choosing-a-shelter-dog.html

Mixed Breeds: www.dogtime.com/dog-breeds/mutt

Ready to Find A Match!

You decided to get a dog. You've considered your lifestyle. You've done a bit of research on breed characteristics. You've thought about where to go. You are ready for the next step – meeting the right dog for you. Remember not only are you trying to find a dog who is a good fit for you, but you also want to make sure that you are a good fit for the dog!

This is the fun, and most important, part. Don't base a decision on looks alone. When the new dog comes home, how he acts is going to be much more important to you than how he looks! You should spend some time with your potential dog. Observe the dog's behavior and demeanor. Can you imagine **this** dog in **your** life? You are looking for the "it" factor, the connection being made—the moment when you say "**This** is the one".

First Meeting Observations: How does the dog react on your first meeting? You are looking for a willingness on the dog's part to interact with you. It's ok if he needs some gentle, patient coaxing from you to draw him out. This interaction is the basis for the life-long relationship you want to build.

- Does he come up to you, nudge you, want a pet? Does he seem to *like* being petted?
- Is the dog curious?
- If he wanders away does he come back to you if you call and clap for him? Right away, or after a bit?
- Is he a little stand offish, tentative? Does he take a little time to warm up to you? Shy dogs will usually be wary of new people and new things, but with time and patience can accept and enjoy the new experiences. Will you be able to live with the shy dog and be his patient guardian?



Interaction:

Playfulness and excitability: While you are playing with the dog, notice how playful he is and how excited he gets.

- Does he like to chase a ball? Don't worry if he doesn't bring it right back to you. Fetch is a teachable skill if the dog is interested. Does the dog like to play tug? Playing tug and letting go are also teachable games.
- Is he chasing around after the kids, you? Are you comfortable with the intensity? Are other family members comfortable with the dog's intensity? Dogs that get very excited and are slow to calm down will need structure and guidance in order to learn limits. They will need to be supervised playing around children. Are you willing to learn how to provide that structure and supervision?
- When you stop playing with the dog, what does he do? Does he let you pet him and stroke him to calm him down? Does he still want to go, go, go? Some dogs take a while to calm down. Will this work for you?

Take a walk: If possible, take the dog on a leash walk. Don't worry too much if the dog pulls. Dogs can learn to walk nicely without pulling.

- What does the dog do when he sees another person approach? Ignores them and keeps walking? Pulls toward the person? Some training lessons may be in order. Are you willing to take the time and money to teach your dog?
- What about another dog approaching? Does the dog pull toward the other one and start barking and growling? Leash frustration is not unusual in dogs. It can be effectively managed by an aware, alert guardian. Is that you?

Ask the Experts: If you are adopting from a breeder or shelter you have a great source for any questions you might have about the dog. Ask them! Some shelters do a behavior evaluation of their dogs and write up the findings. Read that document and ask questions about anything you noticed about the dog while you were with him. Everybody involved wants a successful adoption, to find the right match for both you and the dog, so be ready to listen to any suggestions and advice.

Training Resources:

Congratulations on your new family member! To get off on the right paw together, what about taking a class? Marin Humane's **Behavior & Training** conducts various training classes. Sign up on our [Behavior & Training](#) page for the next available class series.

We also provide **Dog Training Instructors** and **Consultants** available for private training or consultations (on-site or in-home) at 415.506.6280 or OhBeHAVE@MarinHumane.org.

Remember to license your dog (It's the LAW)! If your dog gets lost, a license tag on your dog's collar is the fastest way to reunite you and your dog. Even if your dog is microchipped, a license tag is immediately visible and doesn't require a scanning device to read. For more information about licensing, microchipping, and other services provided by **Marin Humane**, visit us at MarinHumane.org or stop by at 171 Bel Marin Keys Blvd, Novato, CA.