

Before You Get A Dog

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PREFACE

The decision to get a dog is not something to be taken lightly. An adorable puppy can tug at our heartstrings but, in the end, will require a significant investment of your time and money for a significant number of years. Socializing and training a new puppy is time consuming and, occasionally, frustrating. It can increase the amount of stress on the family, and the dog, working to provide the constant supervision, socialization, and training that is necessary to successfully integrate a dog into a family environment. This is especially true if the primary caregiver(s) are working outside of the home and/or have young children, an elderly parent, or other persons and/or pets to care for. This does not mean that it cannot be done. But, prospective dog owners often underestimate the investment of time, energy, and money, required.

Additionally, depending upon what breed or mixed breed you ultimately select it may take some time to find the right breeder and/or the right puppy/dog. Reputable, ethical breeders do not breed frequently. And, they only breed when they have found a pair who has been proven to possess the health and temperaments required to insure, to the extent possible, healthy, well tempered, offspring.

Making this decision impulsively, can lead to frustration, disappointment, and eventually, may result in the surrender of the dog to a shelter or rescue.

In the US, the tragic fact is that, millions of the dogs are prematurely euthanized, annually. And, most often, it is the owners, not the dogs, who are responsible for their premature deaths. Impulsive or poorly thought out decisions; the selection of a difficult or headstrong breed because it is 'popular' or you like how it looks; or, for that matter, any dog selected for looks rather than temperament, 'match' to your lifestyle, and your ability to provide proper care and environment; the lack of consideration of the lifestyle changes you may experience over the next 12 to 14 years; as well as the lack of proper socialization, training, physical activity, and attention -- these are all major contributors to the need for so many shelters and rescues. And, results, all too frequently, in premature euthanasia.

WHY DO YOU WANT A DOG?

The first question you should ask yourself, honestly is . . . **Why do I (we) want a dog?**

If your answer is:

For my son/daughter/children . . . Trust me, this will be YOUR dog! After the 'honeymoon period', the kids may only play with the dog, occasionally. They may groan and grumble about any dog-related responsibilities, doing them, begrudgingly, only after significant prodding from you. As children's interests and activities change, over the years, their level of involvement with the dog will most likely be, inconsistent, at best. Additionally, your children, especially, young children, will need to be 'trained' in how to behave with the dog and will need to be supervised when with the dog.

For protection . . . I know some may disagree but, it is my opinion, that the only time it is a good idea to get a dog for the purpose of protection is in professional or agricultural situations and only when the owner/trainer is humane and knowledgeable of dog behavior and dominant dog training/handling. In all other situations - probably 99.9% - an alarm system, security fence, or other measures are much more appropriate and effective.

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WHY DO YOU WANT A DOG? (con't)

To breed puppies . . . If you've read the third paragraph of this piece and still feel this way, there is probably little I can offer to change your mind. But, just in case, let me restate the case a little more thoroughly. The breeding of dogs is a responsibility not to be taken lightly. If it is not your intention to remain responsible for all of your puppies for their entire lives, including being willing to take back and care for those who may find themselves homeless, do not enter into this endeavor. If you are planning on breeding for profit, understand that there are much easier, more profitable and ethical ways to make a buck. Dogs are living beings and dog breeding requires a significant investment of time, money, labor, knowledge, both academic and practical, patience, and emotional fortitude, to be done responsibly and humanely. Please visit a few of the shelter and rescue websites, or your local shelter, and witness the problem yourself. View the faces of the homeless dogs and talk to the volunteers and staff who, all too often, must take that 'final walk' with them.

Because BreedX is 'Cool', was in a movie you saw, is unique and exotic, is free/cheap, or other such nonsense . . . One of the WORSE reasons to get a dog, or any other animal, for that matter, is because of their physical appearance or popularity due to a movie, TV show, or other publicity. Often, these venues feature exotic, rare or unique breeds that are, in the overwhelming majority of pet situations, unsuitable as companions. This visibility may also draw out those 'breeders' whose primary motivation is profit versus health, temperament, structural soundness and the welfare of their dogs.

And, remember to incorporate the same thoughtful consideration on whether or not to get a dog, and which breed or mix, when your friend, coworker or relative offers you one of Fluffy's puppies. Dogs are never really 'free' or 'cheap' and, in reality, require significant financial, physical, time, and environmental resources. At a minimum, none of these, or other such reasons, are sound selection factors for getting a dog and selecting a particular breed or mix. And, remember, if it is difficult for you to find information on a particular breed, or a breeder of the breed, it follows that you will most likely also have difficulty finding local support services that are familiar with the training, health care, and maintenance needs of that breed.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF DOG OWNERSHIP

However, if you are interested in getting a dog for the RIGHT reasons, please ask yourself the following 10 questions, prior to selecting a breed and breeder or visiting your local shelter or rescue facility:

- 1) Are you, and all those who live with you, committed to spend 12+ years providing health care, food, grooming, training and attention to a dog? Do the people who live with you also want a dog?
- 2) Do you have the time and/or resources available . . . To take your dog for walks and to the vet? To bath, brush, clip, and, otherwise, groom your dog as often as necessary? Will you want to play and, perhaps, work on training daily, with your dog? Are you willing to take your dog to puppy socialization, kindergarten, and basic obedience classes?
- 3) Are there lifestyle-altering events that could occur in your foreseeable future? - A baby, caring for an elderly family member, a divorce, job uncertainty, etc. And, how would you deal with these changes as they impacted your ability to care for a dog?

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THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF DOG OWNERSHIP (con't)

- 4) Is your personality conducive to dog ownership? Do you often feel 'stressed out'? Do you like to have total control over your environment or 'space'? Are you a 'neat freak'? Are you flexible? Patient? Answer honestly - nobody but you will know AND, more importantly, nobody but you will have to live with the results of your trying to 'fit' your personality to a dog.
- 5) Are you physically able to care for a dog? Are you economically able to provide care for a dog?
- 6) Is your environment prepared for a dog and/or are you willing to make the investment of time and money necessary to insure that it does? Is there a yard or park-like area for your dog to walk and relieve him- or her- self? Is your yard, or a portion of it, fenced? If your dog will be outside for any period of time, will you provide a secure and comfortable shelter for your dog? Although you may have a secure and comfortable location for your dog while it is outdoors, dog should not be left outdoors, unattended, for extended periods of time. They can be taunted, released, stolen, or worse. Tethering can cause serious physical harm or death in the event of an entanglement or other such accident. Further, prolonged tethering can cause undesirable behavioral and personality traits to surface. Additionally, garages may contain chemicals, tools and other items that can be dangerous and/or harmful to your dog.
- 7) Will your dog be alone for long periods of time, daily? Can you arrange for the dog to be let out for a romp, given water, medication, and playtime, as necessary, during the day? Or, will you become angered and frustrated by behavioral issues that may arise due to the fact that your dog is alone for long periods of time? (i.e., relieves him or herself indoors; chews up a blanket, your shoes, your favorite chair cushion; barks incessantly, causing your neighbors to become angry or, perhaps, even call animal control on you; etc. Do not plan to leave your dog outdoors or in a garage all day while you are away! If this is in your plans, I suggest you revisit the question "Why do I/We want a dog?"
- 8) Are you willing to spay/neuter your dog, as soon as possible, to reduce the chance of an accidental breeding?
- 9) Do you travel frequently? Will it be difficult for you to find quality care for your dog when you are away?
- 10) Do you really LOVE dogs? If you are truly motivated by your love of dogs, or a particular dog, you most likely don't need this page. You've done your homework and are ready for a lifelong commitment. You will train and play with your dog, provide appropriate veterinary care and nutrition, you will bath and groom him or her, happily, and the occasional behavioral problem won't throw you for a loop. If this is the case, please visit the other related sections of the library for helpful articles on breed or mix selection, puppy or adult?, adoption or breeder, finding a breeder, preparation for your dog, training care, and more.

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CLOSING THOUGHTS

While there are a few breeds, especially exotic or rare breeds, which I would not recommend to people considering dog ownership, there are several shared traits and needs that are basic to all dogs. All require socialization, training, a secure, comfortable and safe environment, grooming and health maintenance, professional health care, a quality diet, companionship, attention, and love. All dogs are canines and think like canines. It is important that you educate yourself through books, training classes, etc., so that you will be able to interpret and understand their behavior and respond appropriately.

Additionally, with regard to "non-shedding dogs", while there is no such animal (except for hairless varieties which present greater maintenance and care challenges), some do shed considerably less than others (i.e., several terrier breeds, schnauzers, poodles, etc.). However, understand that if it is an allergy or asthma that you are concerned with, it is likely not the shedding of hair that causes the reaction in humans, it is proteins in the saliva, dander or contact with urine, that will often trigger allergic reactions. Non-allergenic breeds of dogs or cats do not exist. Animals tend to shed dander at different rates and hair length is only a minor factor in the amount of dander an animal makes. Animals may also be more allergenic at certain times of the year as they go through dander-shedding cycles. The characteristics of a person's allergies can also change over time. Purchasing a so-called "non-allergenic" breed usually does not work out. Getting rid of a pet after emotional attachments have been made is hard for all involved.

Additional recommended online materials includes: Cindy Tittle Moore's Allergy FAQ (<http://www.k9web.com/dog-faqs/allergies.html>) and the Pets and Allergies: Minimizing the Reaction by Clifford Bassett, M.D., FAAAAI (<http://www.aaaai.org/patients/advocate/2001/summer/pets.stm>).

However, if it is the 'mess' you are concerned about, while you can minimize the amount and/or length of the hair/undercoat shed via breed selection and proper grooming, dogs can and do make messes having nothing to do with shedding. So, if muddy coat and paws or a bit of doggy 'fragrance' are going to throw you into a tailspin, please reevaluate if this is the best time for you to get a dog.

Thoughtful breed and breeder selection can improve, to some degree, the odds that you will find a healthy, well-tempered, dog that meets your expectations in a family pet. Deciding to get an older adoptable pure or mixed breed dog can eliminate a few 'unknowns' (See "The Virtues of an Older Dog", Valerie Macys online at <http://www.cockeradoption.com/old-dogs.htm>) but, may, on the other hand, present alternative concerns. In any event, at some point during your dog's life, you will face some 'surprises' or 'issues' that will require some flexibility and out-of-the-ordinary amount of patience, time, and effort on your part. Even when dealing with the most reputable breeder, rescue or shelter, and being extremely diligent and thorough, in your research, your ability to predict you and your dog's future, is limited. Therefore, just as in marriage or parenthood, you must be willing to be somewhat flexible and sincerely committed to responding, responsibly, to deviations from your expectations.

And, finally, while doing some research on weight pulling, I came across a great, practical, primer, by Amy Gerson, on what life with dogs can be like online at <http://home1.gte.net/gersona/warning.htm>. While, specifically, written for Malamutes, these 'issues' can be found in any dog breed or mix and are examples of what you must be willing to deal with when you decide to get a dog. It is true, that many behavioral issues can be solved through training and sufficient activity and exercise; some of these traits are inherent enough to be recurring and frustrating to owners. If digging, chewing, etc. are likely to result in your packing your dog off to a shelter, please reconsider your decision to get a dog.

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