



Behavior and Training Department Tips and Techniques

Choosing A Puppy

If you're thinking about acquiring a puppy, we suggest you first take stock of your life, to see whether you're a good candidate for one of these furry dynamos. The most well-suited families meet at least most of the following criteria:

- The parent or caretaker is home much of the time (no workaholics allowed – pups can't handle 8, 10 or 12 hours alone; certainly not without being lonely and destructive).
- The house has areas that can be barricaded or fenced off from other areas.
- Keeping your house clean is not your primary focus in life.
- Dirty socks and other attractive items are not scattered in various rooms.
- You're not attached to your things in their current condition.
- You do not have white carpets.
- You have a lot of patience, and you don't get angry easily.
- You understand that dogs do not speak nor understand English, Spanish, Swahili, or any other human language.
- You realize that puppyhood lasts longer than you want, and that adolescence lasts even longer.



Picking a Puppy

Before you pick out a puppy, you need to know a few things about them. First, they're cute and cuddly and adorable. You will most likely fall in love with the first one you see, whether it's at your local shelter or your neighbor's house or a breeder. But that doesn't necessarily mean you SHOULD adopt that one. Just as children are born with certain temperamental traits, so, too, are dogs. One human baby might be fairly placid, with an easygoing personality – pretty tolerant of loud noises and able to fall asleep easily. One might be like quicksilver – nervous and over-sensitive, with seemingly no need to rest. So, too, with puppies. Some are very tolerant of handling and noises, others are sensitive, needy and over-reactive, still others might be independent and intolerant. You can find out some of the puppy's traits by spending some time with him, but you have to hold your emotions in check – don't go by the Cuteness Factor!

By and large, tolerant puppies grow up to be tolerant dogs, and sensitive pups grow up to be sensitive dogs. If you have a growing human family, you might want the former rather than the latter, no matter what the pup actually looks like (after all, he won't look like that for long). When you go puppy visiting, try to see more than one puppy in a litter, and try to see at least one parent, preferably both. (In a shelter, this is usually impossible – but it often is if you get a dog from a breeder or neighbor). In fact, try to see the adults FIRST so you know what you're getting in to. If the parent of the mom dog says she's not really good with people, you might choose to check out another litter, just to play it safe. Since you're planning on the next 12 to 14 years with this dog, you may as well set yourself up for success.

It's great if the puppy lives in the house with the breeder/parent. It's even better if the breeder/parent has children, who've been playing with the puppies since shortly after they were born. Certainly, the puppies should have been handled extensively to help them bond with people. Whether they have been or not, you should check your potential pup as objectively as possible (considering the fact that you probably started falling in love the second you saw him).

There have been lots of tests to predict the behavior of dogs, and most of them have not been proven to be effective at all. However, until there IS a proven test, you might consider taking him through a few quick moves.



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1. After the initial meeting, ask the shelter/parent/breeder to let you socialize the puppy alone, or without interference, in a room that the puppy is not familiar with. Let the puppy explore and get used to your presence and smell. Then draw him to you and pet him quite a bit - try to see if he enjoys it. Abruptly stop petting him, and just observe his behavior. If he comes back for more, that's good... if he shakes you off and walks away, that's not so good. Do it a couple of times to see if you can get him to like it. The puppy that walks away is not necessarily a bad puppy - he may just be independent. This characteristic tends to run in certain breeds or breed types; northern dogs (Huskies and Malamutes), for example... or sight hounds (Greyhounds, Salukis, Afghans). However, dogs don't have to be a certain breed or breed type to be independent.
2. Now hold him by the collar and restrain him gently...this isn't supposed to hurt, just to hold him in place against his will. If he doesn't have a collar on, hold him with both your hands around his middle. If he's small enough, turn him on his back in your arms (as though he were a baby). If he doesn't struggle, or does so only briefly, then looks at you questioningly or relaxes, that's very good. If he tries like crazy to get away, or certainly if he throws a temper tantrum with his teeth, that's that's not so good. Try the holding tests a few times to see if he gets used to it, or begins to like it.
3. And finally, (this is the hard one) let him relax, and when he's investigating something other than you, clap your hands and tell him he's a bad boy - act angry. If he turns to you and offers a submissive posture (begins to lower himself, or curls and wags his tail low), or starts licking you, that's great. If he walks away without "hearing" you, not so great. If he growls at you, well, maybe you should consider leaving that puppy for another parent.
4. Ball orientation is a major plus in all dogs - it helps maintain dependence, which we want in a dog. It's also a great way to exercise a dog when you don't have much time. If you don't care about it, don't worry about it. Roll a ball away from you, making sure he sees it. If he chases it and brings it back, you have a winner. If he chases it, catches it, and takes it under a chair or table, not to worry. That can be worked with. If he's not interested, he may never be, or you may have a lot of work to do to get him jazzed about retrieving. Once again, certain breed types are more suitable for this kind of play - retrievers, of course and herding dogs (Border Collies, shepherds) tend to be the most fixated. Northern breeds usually couldn't care less.

A good family dog will want to be with you, act apologetic when you get mad (even if he has no idea what caused your irrational outburst), and relax when you hold him close. There are, of course, other tests you can do, but these are the easiest, and they do help you get a handle on the puppy's temperament.

The most important thing for you as a potential parent to do is to withhold judgment until you've really observed the puppy. It's just so easy to get hooked on the idea that this is your dog just because he's available now (have I mentioned that before?)

One final thought. Many people want a small dog because of space constraints in their house - or because their kids want a little dog. You should realize that many small dogs aren't suitable for a family, just because they ARE small. They feel vulnerable, and often learn to growl or bark to keep people from stepping on them (as an experiment, try spending half an hour with your head on the floor looking up and you'll see what I mean). So if a small dog is what you want, be VERY careful during the choosing process.

Excerpted from "Parenting Your Dog" by Trish King, Director, Behavior and Training