

# Selecting the Right Dog

By Diane Jarvis

“Mom, can we get a puppy?”

If you are thinking about adding a dog to your family here is some food for thought. Each year, six to eight million dogs and cats enter shelters nationwide. At least one third of those are owner surrenders, and between 1.5 and 2 million are purebreds. Sadly, three to four million will be destroyed, often due solely to lack of space, time and money.

I use these statistics to make a point; that the decision to get a dog (or cat) is not to be taken lightly. Having a pet requires a commitment for the life of the animal, often 10 – 15 years.

That commitment includes lots of time for socialization and training. All dogs and puppies need to learn how to be well-behaved members of the family, and behavioral problems are the number one cause of owner surrenders to shelters.

Other considerations include costs, size, activity level, grooming issues, and why you want a dog. Is it for companionship, to guard your home, or a specific purpose such as herding or hunting?

Cost can be an issue, especially if you are on a tight budget. The initial cost can vary from free to several thousand dollars for some purebreds. Add on vaccinations, sterilization, food, toys, collars and leashes, and emergency medical care and it can be quite expensive.

Size (sometimes) matters. Do you live in a townhouse or apartment, or house with a large yard? If you rent, have you checked with the landlord if pets are allowed. Often there is a size restriction of 35 pounds or under. And not all small dogs are ideal for apartment dwellers – Jack Russell Terriers, for example, are small but very energetic.

On the other hand, there are large dog breeds, or older dogs, that don't need a lot of space to run and will be fine with a walk once or twice a day.

Think about grooming needs of long vs. short hair – fluffy dogs are cute but that fur can create extra work. Shedding can drive a meticulous housekeeper crazy! Double-coated breeds shed more and need regular brushing, and all dogs need to be bathed and perhaps clipped. Grooming expenses will be a regular cost.

Your lifestyle will help determine a desirable temperament. This is the dog's basic nature apart from training; some dogs are easy going and laid back, while others are excitable or nervous. Do you live alone, have small children or other pets, or have a busy household with lots of visitors or activity?

Finally, all family members should have input into the decision to get a pet. Make a list of priorities and then do some research into different breeds. Are you intent on having a purebred dog, or will a mixed breed do? There are pros and cons to both.

Choosing a purebred allows you to better predict size, appearance and temperament. It is not a guarantee of health, although a reputable breeder will try hard to produce genetically healthy and emotionally sound puppies. They will also have a return policy if the dog doesn't work out for any reason, and will offer support if you have questions. Avoid pet stores, as most of their puppies come from cruel, unregulated puppy mills.

Another good option for a purebred is to find a breed rescue group. They rescue purebred dogs that have been given up and rehome them after a careful adoption process. You can find information at [www.azdogs.com](http://www.azdogs.com) on Kennel Clubs and rescue groups around Arizona.

Of course, there is the option of shelter dogs. While there are purebreds in the shelters, there are also lots of mixed breeds. If you know the ancestry of a mixed breed you can still predict, to a certain point, potential size and appearance. You get the benefit of two or more different breeds and mixed breeds are generally less prone to the genetic defects that plague purebreds. Mixed breeds are often more adaptable to today's lifestyle.

Remember that choosing the right dog is essential to the success of the relationship, and it is not about how cute or sad the pup looks behind the bars of a cage. If you don't find the right dog on the first visit to a shelter, save yourself for "the right one" and return another time. If you pick a dog for the wrong reasons you may end up getting annoyed with the dog even though it isn't his fault, feel guilty when it doesn't work out, and the dog may wind up back at the shelter.