

How to Choose a Dog, Part 2

By Sherry Woodard

So, you've decided that you're going to get a dog. How do you choose a dog who will be a good fit for you and your lifestyle? First, consider what you will want this dog to be doing in daily life. Will the dog be:

- Playing with children?
- Living with cats?
- Living with or playing with other dogs?
- Going to dog parks or doggie daycare?
- Learning to compete in dog sports such as agility or flyball?
- Going running or hiking with you?

Not every dog can or will be appropriate for all of these things. Choose a dog whom you will be ready to learn and grow with.

Before going to meet a potential canine candidate, read "Dog Body Language" to help you recognize the dog's comfort level. When you go to meet the dog, take some small, soft chicken treats (not dry biscuits) and a couple of toys. See if the dog takes the treats gently and wants to play with a toy. If the dog doesn't want the treats, he/she may be ill or fearful. Don't be alarmed if the dog doesn't want to play with the toy. It can take a little time for a dog to warm up to the idea of playing, or the dog may not be feeling well.

To find out the dog's comfort level with handling, give a quick little exam. Touch his ears, look at his teeth, lift a paw or two, give him a hug, lift the dog. If the dog is small, you may want to see if he is comfortable being carried. Even large dogs will be lifted if you are helping the dog onto a grooming table or into a tall vehicle. Every dog will need grooming and vet care in the future, and handling by strangers often happens in any public setting.

When you're doing the exam, use caution: Many dogs are fearful about being handled by strangers. Don't be shy in asking for help. The dog's caregiver or the adoption staff should know something about each dog's behavior. If they can't help you with introductions or with handling the dogs, ask if anyone else can help you. If not, I recommend that you go elsewhere to adopt.



If possible, take your potential new family member out to meet dogs, cats, children and other adults. See how the dog acts on leash. Watching the dog's comfort level overall in public will help you know if this dog is going to enjoy and be safe doing the things you plan to share together. One caveat, though, about the dog's behavior: It may change some once he is home and more comfortable.

Many rescued dogs come with a few challenges – behavioral or physical – that can be easily overcome. Some dogs in need of new homes have disabilities, such as blindness or deafness, or chronic medical conditions, such as diabetes or thyroid issues. Caring for a special-needs pet is often not as daunting as it seems. Dogs with disabilities often surprise their people with how resilient and adaptable they are. Special-needs pets can teach us a lot about compassion, acceptance and perseverance.

If you choose a dog who lacks social skills (and many do), please plan to help this dog become more comfortable in our human world. Many of the resources in this library describe simple, positive ways to do this. It is important to teach and reward wanted behavior so your dog develops good manners.

In fact, socialization is a lifelong process. All dogs should be socialized throughout their lifetimes to become and stay relaxed and comfortable in different situations. Even if you are not a very social person, you should help your dog to trust some other people, since the more social the dog is, the safer the dog will be in our human world. Most bites happen when a dog is fearful.

Having a great relationship with your dog is based on building a foundation of trust. If you read through the rest of the resources in this library, you can help to set a dog up for great success as a member of your family for life.

Remember, you will be responsible for this dog's behavior wherever he goes and with whomever he meets. Keep him happy, healthy and safe.

Sherry Woodard is the animal behavior and care consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission.