

P-p-p-pick up a puppy!

Emma Marchington MRCVS, of Brelades Vets in Dorking, offers advice to anyone thinking of getting a dog

There is a lot to consider when getting a new dog. Whether you have had dogs for years, not had a dog since your childhood or a first time dog owner, it is a very exciting time but not a decision to be rushed. The first things to consider are why you want a dog and how it is going to fit into your life.

Dogs can make excellent companions, be fun and loyal members of the family and get you out into the fresh air, even on the wettest and windiest of days. Everyone knows that dogs are a responsibility and your life will have to change to accommodate their needs, but there is much more to consider than that.

First is the cost. You need to look far beyond the cost of simply buying your new puppy. Most people will know to budget for monthly food and annual vet's bills, but there are many more costs to think about. Dog insurance is certainly advisable, and you should shop around to find a good policy at a good price. Make sure you know exactly what cover you are getting for your monthly payments and bear in mind that the cost per year is likely to increase as the dog ages. For example, you will pay a premium to have a 'for life' cover but it means that if a condition is diagnosed at any age this will be continued to be covered under your policy for the whole of your dog's life, otherwise it is often excluded after the first year.

You may need to make adaptations to your car like a dog crate or dog bars, and you should certainly make sure your garden is dog proof. That means closing any holes in the fence, and making sure any gates are secure.

You will also need to consider the costs of day-to-day care as

well as the occasional kennels or dog sitter when you are away on holiday. If you are out at work during the day, be realistic about the costs of a dog walker or dog day care. Just like child care these can quickly mount up.

If you have never had the responsibility of owning your own dog before, I would recommend borrowing a friend's dog for the weekend. This will give you a taste for the day-to-day ups and downs of owning a dog. You will have to forfeit that long Sunday morning lie-in to get up and let the dog out for the loo, but on the plus side you do get to enjoy a nice morning walk before lunch.

Puppies don't come ready trained and, although toilet training is usually top of people's minds, the first few months are critical for lots of other things too. Getting your puppy well socialised is key to having a confident, well-rounded dog which is good with other dogs and people, especially children – and this takes time.

It is certainly worth buying a dog training book, and making time to go to puppy socialisation classes, but this alone won't be enough. You have to be out there with your dog, guiding it through all these new experiences. If you start to see unwanted behaviour don't wait and allow it to become learnt, go and seek advice. There are dog behaviourists that can do one-on-one visits to work through problems like snapping at other dogs, separation anxiety when left alone, or if you are struggling to master recall.

There is much more to consider, but for now let's look at that initial choice – which dog is best for you and your lifestyle. Firstly you need to decide whether you want a puppy or an adult dog – or even something in-between. Gun dogs, for instance, are often sold part-trained at adolescence.

Your next decision is whether to have a male or female dog. This is largely a matter of personal preference and there is no right or wrong decision. There are lots of clichés and

although there seems to be an element of truth in these stereotypes, in my experience it often just comes down to the individual personality of the dog. Females are typically thought to be easier to train as a result of being less distractable while male dogs are meant to be more loving and be focused on people's attention. Saying that, my labrador bitch is very loving but very easily distracted whilst training, so there are no hard and fast rules.

You need to think about your home and environment as a whole when choosing a suitable dog. For instance, do you have a garden or easy access to nearby outdoor space for toileting? Do you have good safe walks nearby? If you are trying to fit in a decent morning walk with your dog in the week around a school run or work, then having easy access to a local walk will be very important.

It is likely that the whole family will be sharing the day-to-day chores, and having a dog will certainly impact everyone's life. Everyone should be on board and actually want a dog. It can be a good idea to sit down and figure out a typical week, to make sure everyone is committed and able to do their share. It is important to have a contingency plan if an emergency comes up, as the dog will still need feeding, walking and looking after regardless. It is good to sound out neighbours, friends or other family members for these emergencies.

Deciding on a breed is much like choosing the sex of your dog and is a very individual decision. Some people will say that certain breeds are best suited to certain lifestyles or situations – if only it was that simple, although there is some truth in it. If you live in a flat then a Great Dane will be less suitable than a Shih Tzu.

There is a lot of guidance online. For instance, the Kennel Club have a very informative breed information centre covering over 200 breeds on their website, giving guidance on size, average exercise requirements, grooming and average life span.

If you have a breed in mind, it is definitely worth considering that some breeds have inherited illnesses that they can be more prone to. The more you know going into the decision-making process the easier it will be to identify possible problems, and the more likely you are to end up with a dog that suits you and your lifestyle.

Remember that there are many dogs in rescue centres up and down the country that are desperate for homes. Do bear in mind that with a rescue dog you do not always know their full history or what past experiences they may have gone through. Most rescue centres are very good at highlighting dogs which have issues, for example with other dogs or children. Some issues may take time to show; for example the dog may be good with people out of the house but not good when new people come into their home.

If you have young children then getting a dog brings added responsibilities. No matter how good a dog seems with kids, you are responsible for teaching your children to respect boundaries around the dog, and not leaving them alone with the dog or in vulnerable positions (for example next to the dog when you feed it).

It takes a special sort of owner with the time to dedicate to dogs which have known issues but it can be extremely rewarding to rebuild the trust and confidence of a vulnerable dog. Realistically, though, not all issues can be fully resolved and coping mechanisms may need to be in place for the rest of the dog's life – and this goes back to making an informed decision right from the start.

The important thing is not to rush into a decision. Enjoy researching which dog is right for you and open up a whole new exciting chapter to share with your new best friend.

Which breed is for you?

People often try to match breeds with their lifestyle and

family situation, but things are never that simple. Your choice will be influenced by personal tastes and perhaps your experience with dogs you grew up with. It is important to do some research, however, to make sure that the dog you're considering is suitable for your situation. Here is a quick guide to the characteristics and needs of some of the most popular breeds.

Labradors are widely regarded as a good all-round dog equally suited to family life or working as a gun dog trained to retrieve. They do need a substantial amount of exercise but generally will settle well in-between long walks. Labradors can be prone to inherited eye, elbow and hip problems so if you are getting a puppy do make sure that both the parents were thoroughly checked.

Cocker spaniels are another popular family dog known to be highly sociable and intelligent. They are smaller than labradors but certainly just as lively and will spend much of their time hunting through the undergrowth when out on walks. Like a labrador, they will require a substantial amount of exercise and have a long life-span.

Dachshunds were originally bred for working: going underground or tracking game. Despite their size they still need significant walking and have a long life-span, averaging over 12 years. They can be quiet independent and single-minded as well as being very loyal and playful. Sadly they are prone to back problems which can require specialist surgery.

Greyhounds are often exceptionally good with people and despite being quite large dogs are known to be gentle. However their instinct to chase and kill is very much in their genes, and they find it hard to resist chasing smaller animals such as rabbits, cats and even smaller dogs. It is possible to cat-train greyhounds but this requires patience and plenty of time. Many greyhounds are available to rescue after being raced, and there are specialist rescue charities that you can

contact directly.

Collies were originally used for herding, often working closely with farm animals. They are typically extremely loyal, very intelligent, and enjoy working closely with their owner whilst being physically and mentally stimulated. There are some excellent agility classes and clubs which will be great fun for both of you.

German Shepherds were originally used for herding and flock guarding and nowadays are often used by the military and police. They are loyal, trainable and highly intelligent. They can also be prone to hip problems so make sure you do your research. They are big dogs with males averaging between 30-40kg and require a lot of exercise.

Border Terriers were also originally working dogs, used to kill vermin and go to ground. Terriers typically are tenacious and charismatic and can be feisty. That said borders tend to be one of the more relaxed terriers. They stay at a medium to small size, and are bright, energetic dogs with naturally good temperaments.

Yorkshire Terriers remain very small dogs and have a long life expectancy, often well over twelve years. They do not require exceptionally long walks and stay light enough to carry comfortably. They often love attention but don't let their size fool you as they are often quite bold and independent as well as being inquisitive. They can be tricky to toilet train – but so can any dog.

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The Kennel Club, www.thekennelclub.org.uk