

SELECTING A PET: GUIDELINES FOR DOGS & CATS

Many behavior and health problems in pets can be prevented by seeking guidance before obtaining a new pet. Such a consultation will help you select the best pet for the household, but also provide information on how to prepare in advance for the new arrival. Selection topics to be discussed include the species, breed, age, and sex of the pet, where to obtain the pet and how the kennel, breeder, and pets can best be assessed. Advice on preparing the home will include housing, bedding, feeding, training, exercise, scheduling and health care requirements.

What breed is best for my home and family?

The first decision is whether to obtain a purebred or a mixed breed. By selecting a mixed breed from a pound, an abandoned animal will be re-homed. Some of the genetic problems associated with inbreeding can be avoided and the initial cost to acquire the pet will be considerably lower by obtaining a mixed breed. However, the best way to predict the behavioral and physical attributes of an adult dog or cat is to obtain a purebred from known parentage. This is particularly important when selecting a puppy or kitten. Unless the parents are known it is extremely difficult to predict the size, health, or behavior that is likely to emerge as the dog grows up. In contrast, selecting an adult allows assessment of the physical characteristics, health and behavior of the animal.

If a purebred is chosen, it should be a breed whose physical and behavioral characteristics best suit the family. However, with hundreds of breeds to choose from and such a wide variation of behavior types within a breed, the most consistent selection factor will be the physical characteristics. Therefore first select a breed that appeals in physical appearance, including coat type, size and shape. Also consider that the lifespan, since the giant breeds of dogs live considerably shorter lives than smaller breeds.

Before the selection consultation visit dog shows what the adults of each breed look like. Do some reading. There are a variety of books (and now CD-ROMs) that can help guide you through the selection process. Some books concentrate on the physical characteristics, history of the breed, or health concerns, while others cover breed behavioral characteristics, and how to select individuals from a breeder, shelter, or litter. Behavioral factors to consider as you try to decide upon a breed of dog include, activity level, exercise requirements and any reported behavior problems of the breed. Also, find out the origin of the breed (for what work was the breed developed) as this will be one of the most strongly inherited traits. Once you have narrowed the selection down to a few breeds, your veterinarian can guide you as to the physical and behavioral problems that you need to be aware of for each breed.

At what age should I obtain a pet?

Puppies are most social from about 3 to 12 weeks of age. For the first seven to eight weeks primary socialization should be directed to other puppies and littermates to aid a puppy to develop healthy social relationships with other dogs. From seven weeks on, well before the socialization period ends, socialization should be directed to people, new environments and other pets. For these reasons, the ideal time to select and obtain a new puppy is at 7 to 8 weeks of age. This allows adequate time to be in its new home, and bond to its new family, well before its primary socialization period ends.

Since the most receptive period for kitten socialization is 3 to 9 weeks of age, a kitten should either be obtained by 7 weeks of age, or the new owners must ensure that the kitten has had adequate human contact prior to 7 weeks of age. Don't obtain a kitten much earlier than 7 weeks since this deprives it of social contact with its mother and littermates.

Acquiring an adult dog or cat can avoid some of the problems of bringing a new puppy or kitten into the home. This is especially true for dogs where the time and commitment required to train a puppy are considerable. Fulfilling the play, feeding, elimination, and exercise needs of a puppy or kitten may be impractical for a family who spends much of the day away from home. On the other hand, an adult dog or

cat that has had insufficient or inappropriate training or insufficient socialization may have behavior problems that are difficult to resolve. For owners who are ready and able to meet the demands of a growing puppy or kitten, obtaining a pet during its primary socialization period is strongly recommended.

Should I consider a male or female pet?

In dogs, males tend to be slightly larger in stature than females of the same breed and somewhat more dominant. Castration of male dogs reduces sexually dimorphic behaviors such as mounting, roaming, urine marking, and aggression directed toward other male dogs. Castration in cats reduces urine odor and sexually dimorphic behavior traits such as roaming, fighting, and urine marking (by about 90%).

Where should I obtain my pet?

Perhaps the most important reason to obtain a pet from a breeder or private home is to observe the physical characteristics, health and behavior of the parents. Choose a breeder who is open and willing to answer questions, and who will allow you to tour the kennel and meet the parents. When a puppy or kitten is obtained from a breeder or private home you are also able to observe the early environment and assess the exposure to people that the pet has had. A personal relationship with the breeder may be helpful should later problems arise. Dogs or cats acquired from pet stores, puppy mills, or shelters, may have received insufficient early socialization, are at higher risk for contracting disease, and the parents cannot be observed.

How do I decide which pet to choose?

The value and effectiveness of performing assessment tests on young puppies and kittens is highly debatable since many behavior and health problems do not emerge until the pet matures. Perhaps, the best approach is a simple, common sense evaluation. Dogs can be observed and handled to determine which ones are the most sociable, playful, or affectionate. Those with undesirable traits such as shyness, or uncontrollable biting may be less suitable. Different puppy temperament tests have been detailed in the literature, but there is no good available evidence that they are predictive of future behavior. What puppy testing can do is identify problem areas that may need attention from an early age.

For cats, three personality types have been identified: 1) sociable 2) timid and unfriendly or 3) active and aggressive. Because the socialization period for litters ends earlier than in dogs, early handling is extremely important. Kitten assessment tests can be a valuable tool in determining the effects of genetics, socialization and early handling. If the cat tolerates handling, lifting and petting with little or no fear or resistance it is likely to make a good family pet. Fearful, timid, hard to restrain or aggressive cats should be avoided.

If you are obtaining an older puppy or kitten, or an adult pet, assessment tests likely become more accurate (and therefore more valuable) since you will also be evaluating the effects of previous socialization, previous training, previous experiences and some degree of maturation and development.