

Finding the Perfect Dog

There is no such animal. So, stop looking.

By Jon Katz

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Americans love animals and know little about them. We are used to convenience and short cuts; we respond to marketing. Meanwhile, the pet industry needs to move a lot of animals, so it promotes the idea that there's a Perfect Dog for everyone.

The Perfect Dog is an enticing fantasy pooch. It's the dog that instantly learns to pee outdoors, never menaces or frightens children, plays gently with other dogs, won't jump on the UPS guy, never rolls in gross things, eats only the appropriate food at the right time, and never chews anything not meant for him. This dog does not exist.

(The Perfect Dog is first cousin to the equally yearned-for Disney Dog. That's the one who loves you alone, who will sacrifice his life to pull your toddler back from the busy street, who will cross 1,000 miles of towering snowdrifts to find you if you accidentally leave him behind in the Arctic. I want such a dog, but I don't have one. Mine would make their way to the nearest deli and stay there.)

The peddling of Perfect Dogs amounts to a multibillion dollar business in the United States. You'll never see images of ugly dogs vomiting in the living room or terrorizing the letter carrier on dog food commercials. Those dogs-, the ones we want-, are always adorable. Their happy owners are not holding pooper scoopers.

Because people have such ill-informed and unrealistic expectations, dogs often suffer when their true hungry, messy, and alien natures are revealed. They get yelled at, irritated by studded chains and zapped by electronic collars, tethered to trees, hidden away in basements and back yards, or dumped at shelters and euthanized.

The most important time for you and your dog is the stretch you spend considering whether, where, and how to get a dog and what sort of dog to get. Unfortunately, that process lasts only a few minutes for most people. Thus, much trouble for both species.

Most Americans acquire dogs impulsively and for dubious reasons: as a Christmas gift for the kids. Because they saw one in a movie. To match the new living-room furniture. Because they moved to the suburbs and see a dog as part of the package. Because they couldn't resist that wide-eyed puppy in the mall pet store or the poster published by the local shelter.

Even the scant time it will take to read and mull over the following questions (and some answers) might improve your chances of finding the right dog.

1. Why do I want a dog?

Researchers studying human-animal attachments find we have complex personal motives for wanting a dog (or cat) and for choosing a particular one at a given time. It's important to understand some of those impulses, even if it means picking at psychic scabs. Are you lonely? Sick of people? Unhappy at work? Re-enacting some familial drama? Drawn to the aesthetics of a beautiful purebred? Compelled by the idea of rescuing, but not necessarily training, a dog?

Understanding your own motivation doesn't mean getting a dog is wrong, but it may help you make a better choice of animal or decide that what you really need doesn't come on four legs.

2. How can I get a well-behaved dog?

You can't. You can only create one. Dogs don't come that way. It's natural canine behavior to chew on all sorts of things, roll in other animals' droppings, hump and fight other dogs, menace anything that invades the home. All these behaviors can be curbed, but that takes a lot of work. Trainers say it requires nearly 2,000 repetitions of a behavior for a dog to completely absorb it.

3. Does it matter what kind of dog I get?

There is a kind of canine communism that suggests all dogs are equal and, potentially, wonderfully alike. I don't think so. It is both foolish and irresponsible to know nothing about the characteristics of the animal that you, your family, and your neighbors will have to live with for years. Last year, more than 400,000 kids were bitten badly enough by dogs to require a hospital visit. Don't add to the number.

4. Is it wrong to buy a purebred when so many dogs face confinement and death in shelters?

It's about as wrong as having a baby when millions of poor children suffer. Getting the right dog involves not only moral but practical considerations. Acquiring a rescue or shelter dog can be incredibly rewarding, but when you adopt one, you may also acquire behavioral issues caused by previous mistreatment. You may need to be prepared for even more arduous training than usual. Raising a dog acquired from a good and reputable breeder, who understands the dog's temperament and the human's circumstances and can match the two, is much easier. Working with a Lab, standard poodle, golden retriever, or German shepherd breeds that have worked with humans for centuries and whose behavioral traits are well known may mean fewer surprises.

5. How should I get a dog?

There's no one way. Avoid the puppy mills unscrupulous breeders mass-breed and in-breed dogs and sell them to pet stores. Go to a shelter, rescue group, or

experienced breeder (get some references). Whoever provides the dog should be skeptical. A good breeder or experienced rescue agency wants you to prove that you'll be a capable caretaker. The interrogation and screening can be annoying, but it's also a sign that you're on the right track. A breeder ought to know if you work long hours away from home, have a fenced yard, have kids or other animals, or if you have access to parks. Why are there all those mastiffs, Rottweilers, and border collies in Manhattan? It's what happens when unscrupulous breeders meet thoughtless customers.

6. Is it a mistake to buy a dog for your child?

Only if you are unrealistic enough to believe your kid's promises that of course she'll take care of the new puppy. Kids have short attention spans. They'll coo over the puppy, but in a few months it will be a dog. And who will be walking it at 6 a.m. on a winter morning? Don't surprise your kids with a puppy they really might prefer a new computer.

Some romantics see the match between a human and dog as kismet; If they're "right" for one another, or destined to be together, they'll fall in love at first sight. But most puppies are cute. And few humans like to accept the idea that the affectionate puppy is as drawn by the food he smells on your hands as by some mysterious ethereal connection. Be cautious. Go slow. Think about it.

Jon Katz's next book, *The Dogs of Bedlam Farm: An adventure with three dogs, 15 sheep, two donkeys and me*, will be published in October. He can be e-mailed at jdkat3@aol.com .