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SELECTING A PET – GUIDELINES

Seeking guidance before obtaining a new pet can prevent many behavior and health problems in pets. 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 pet might be best for my family?

The primary reason that pet owners might one day need to relinquish their pets is because of the unrealistic expectations that they had when they first entered into pet ownership. Therefore, before getting started, be certain that you understand the time, commitment and expense that you will be undertaking over the next 15 to 20 years. While pet ownership has innumerable benefits, it also comes with tremendous responsibilities. The first decision therefore is whether a pet is right for you, and if so which type of pet. For example, dogs require a level of training, exercise, housetraining, and outdoor activities that are not required by most cats. They will need to develop proper social skills with each new animal or person that they meet, and may present a greater challenge for supervision



and preventing household damage, than do most cats. On the other hand, cats that live indoors will need to take their entire repertoire of behaviors that they might normally do outdoors and have them directed toward appropriate indoor outlets (for elimination, scratching, climbing, perching, playing and feeding/hunting). Learn about normal behavior, the principles of reward based training, the time, effort, and expense that will be needed for training and care, and the housing, feeding, grooming, and health care requirements of each species and breed that you might be considering. Also consider your support system during times of illness or vacation to insure that you will have sufficient care for your pet. Finally, seek guidance from your veterinarian about obtaining a pet that is suitable for your home, family and lifestyle, and as to how to prepare your home for the arrival of your new pet.

What breed is best for my home and family?

Once you decide upon the species (e.g. dog or cat), the next decision is whether to obtain a purebred or a mixed breed. By selecting a mixed breed from a pound, or a purebred from a breed rescue agency an abandoned animal will be re-housed. With a mixed breed, 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 few breeds that appeal 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 and cat shows to observe the appearance of the adult individuals of each breed. Do some reading. There are a variety of books, and Internet sites that can help to 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 or cat include activity level, exercise requirements, coat care and any reported behavior problems of the breed. Perhaps the most important factor to consider is the origin of the breed as the traits and behaviors for which the breed has been bred and selected (herding, protection, hunting, etc.) are the most strongly inherited. These factors are also an important consideration when considering the type of household, exercise and training that you will need to provide for your pet, and the types of behavior problems that might arise. Once you have narrowed the selection down to a few breeds, your veterinarian can guide you regarding 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, an ideal age to obtain a new puppy might be 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. However, one drawback of obtaining a puppy at this age is that socialization and play will also need to continue with its own species, so that if you do not already have another dog in your home, this may be a challenge to accomplish successfully. It may suffice to arrange for regular play sessions with the dogs of family, friends and relatives. If this option is not available, puppy classes should be considered.



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. However, unlike puppy the testing of puppies, temperament testing of adult dogs and cats may be a useful means of assessing behavior. 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 assertive. Castration of male dogs reduces sexually dimorphic behaviors such as mounting, roaming, urine marking, and aggression directed toward other male dogs (see our handout 'Neutering' – canine). Castration in cats reduces urine odor and sexually dimorphic behavior traits such as roaming, fighting, and urine marking (by about 90%). See our handout 'Neutering' – feline.

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. Although often not available for assessment, the genetic effects of the father, especially in cats, when it comes to boldness and assertiveness. If the parents have been previously bred, contacting the owners of any siblings from previous litters might provide even greater insight. 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. Be certain to ask your veterinarian to prepare you with appropriate questions for the breeder including eye examinations, hip dysplasia certification for the parents and any other health or behavioral problems to which the breed may be prone. 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. 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 example, puppies or kittens that are excessively fearful, timid, pain sensitive or noise reactive and those that exhibit excessive biting may be less suitable. Recent studies have shown that assessment testing may become increasingly more accurate as the dog ages. In fact, one advantage in selecting an adult pet is that it might be possible for a trained observer to be able to accurately assess the pet's temperament and personality to determine what behavior problems might arise. A number of temperament and assessment tests have been developed, which might provide some insight as to what problems are likely to arise. However, most of these tests have yet to be rigorously evaluated as to their predictability. (For a list of some of these tests see references below).

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.

Selection resources:

Numerous internet sites are available that contain breed facts and pictures and breed selection guides. In addition, breed organizations and rescue groups offer detailed advice on individual breeds, but may be somewhat biased in favor of the breed.

- Internet sites are also available that can serve as guide for pet selection including ckc.ca, akc.org, cfainc.org, dogs-in-canada.com
- Temperament testing for shelter dog placement – Assess-a-pet - <http://www.suesternberg.com>, SAFER test www.americanhumane.org, ASPCA New York (in development by Amy Marder)
- Temperament testing: AKC good citizenship test (www.akc.org/love/cgc/program.cfm) - American Temperament Test Society Inc. (www.atts.org/index.html), CKC good citizenship (www.habac.ca)
- Temperament testing for therapy dogs: Therapy Dogs International (www.tdi-dog.org) - Delta Society Pet Partner (www.deltasociety.org)

Texts / resources

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