RVC Animal Care Trust
Royal Veterinary College

Buying a dog

There are three main questions when getting a dog:

- Which breed to choose?
- Should I get a puppy or an adult rescue dog?
- Where should I get my dog from?

The average lifetime cost of owning a dog is £16,000-31,000, and this figure does not include the cost of serious illness or injury. Dogs typically live for at least 10-15 years, so taking on a dog is a significant financial and time investment.

Which breed to choose?

Each of the breeds of dog that we now keep as pets once had its own working role. They are the product of selective breeding to produce physical and mental characteristics that make them suitable for a particular function.

Examples of working roles and breeds include:

- Herding: Collie breeds, German Shepherd.
- Guarding: Doberman pinscher, Rottweiler, Schnauzer.
- Control of vermin: Terrier breeds.

Whilst dogs from all of these breeds can make excellent pets, it is important to realise that each will have different needs and aptitudes. Before buying a dog, you should research the original working function of its breed and consider how a dog with that background might fit in with your circumstances and lifestyle. The working role of a breed strongly indicates needs you will have to meet, and tendencies that you may have to overcome through additional training. For example, if you choose a border collie you should expect to spend time on activities such as agility training, and you may need to do training to stop it from "herding" cyclists and joggers. A guarding breed dog must be well trained and very well socialised with people so that it's guarding does not become a nuisance.

Health is also important. Hereditary illness is present in some breeds, and there are screening programmes to prevent these illnesses being passed from one generation to the next. For example, hip dysplasia affects many breeds of dogs and there is a testing scheme to prevent puppies being bred from badly affected dogs. Don't buy a puppy unless its parents have been fully screened for any hereditary illness in its breed.

Mixed breed dogs are much less likely to suffer from hereditary disease, but their personality is a combination of features taken from their working function. So, a collie-crossbreed may still have a very strong desire to chase and herd.

Should I get a puppy or an adult rescue dog?

A puppy is a "blank slate"; it is your responsibility to bring out its character and make it into a great companion. So, if you get a puppy you will need to set aside a lot of time throughout it's first 1-2 years of life for socialisation and training. This includes puppy classes, training classes, daily training exercises at home and on walks, plenty of play, and lots of walks to meet as many dogs and people as possible.

The dog population in the UK is large and, because people's circumstances change, many dogs pass through rehoming centres. Getting an adult dog from a rehoming centre may be an excellent choice, particularly if you don't have experience of rearing a puppy. Information about the background of some of these dogs is often limited, but if you obtain your dog from a reputable local shelter you will be able ask for support if you have any problems.

Where should I get my dog from?

In general, it is best to get your dog from somewhere that is quite local. This makes it easier to get help and support if you have a problem, and it avoids putting the dog through a lengthy and stressful car journey.

If you decide to get a puppy, it is essential to see both of its parents and the environment it was reared in.

Signs that indicate a good puppy:

- Healthy, well fed and active.
- Confident and interested in its environment.
- Not afraid of people.
- Reared inside the home, and not in a kennel or outbuilding.
- Neither parent shows any signs of fear or aggression.

Do not buy a puppy that is ill, underfed or living in an unsuitable environment; you will be taking on a potential problem and funding someone who should not be breeding dogs. Instead, report the breeder to the RSPCA and the Kennel Club (if the breeder is selling registered pedigree puppies). These organisations will be able to take action of there is a problem.

To avoid pester power that could push you into making a costly mistake, don't take children with you when you first go to see a litter of puppies. Once you have decided that the puppies are suitable, you can take your children to see them on another day.

Apart from the main rehoming organisations, such as Dogs Trust and the RSPCA, there are breed specific rehoming charities. These can be very useful if you have decided to get a particular breed of dog.

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