

Battersea Dogs & Cats Home

4 Battersea Park Road
London
SW8 4AA

Telephone 020 7622 3626
Fax 020 7622 6451

Old Windsor

Priest Hill
Old Windsor
Berkshire
SL4 2JN

Telephone 01784 432929
Fax 01784 471538

Brands Hatch

Crowhurst Lane
Ash
Kent
TN15 7HH

Telephone 01474 874994
Fax 01474 872855

www.dogshome.org

Factsheet

What to think about before getting a dog



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This factsheet is designed to help you and your family think about the issues involved in deciding to get a new dog.

Dog ownership requires commitment and a responsible attitude, and should never be entered into lightly. It is important to remember that you will have full responsibility for your dog's proper care. He will prove to be a loyal and entertaining companion only if you are prepared to give enough in return. Rehoming a rescued dog can be incredibly rewarding, but it can also be hard work. Battersea Dogs & Cats Home alone cares for nearly 9,000 unwanted dogs every year. Please think carefully before making this decision.



Considering a new addition to the family

A cartoon dog is sitting at a desk with a checklist. It is surrounded by several speech bubbles containing questions about dog ownership. The questions are:

- How much time do you have to commit to your dog?
- How active are you?
- What type of dog will get on with the other pets in the household (or with another animal that visits you regularly)?
- How much will it cost to look after your dog?
- How much experience of dogs do children that will come into contact with your dog have?
- Do you have another dog or cat? If so, will they appreciate the new arrival?
- What size, age, sex or even coat type would suit you best?
- How big is your house and what are the facilities (parks etc) in your area like?
- If it's a particular breed that interests you then how much do you know about it?
- How does that particular breed of dog behave?
- Are there any veterinary problems associated with the breed?
- How long will your dog have to spend on his own?
- Do you have grandchildren or children that visit regularly?
- What sort of dog will be suitable to live with your children?

These are all questions that must be answered beforehand, not only for your sake but for the dog you are about to take on.

Selecting the right dog to suit your family's lifestyle is often a difficult task, since there are hundreds of types of dog to choose from.



Physical attributes



Size

The size of your home and garden should dictate the size of your chosen pet – a large dog in a one bedroom flat with no garden is not sensible. However, size is often less important than a dog's energy levels – large dogs do not necessarily need more exercise than small dogs, but almost always require more space. You also need to consider what size of dog you are physically able to handle – for example, a dog that you can take for a walk, not one that walks you! Be realistic about the size of dog that will suit your home and lifestyle.

Male or Female?

This is really based on your own personal choice. However, you may want to consider meeting both the dog and the bitch of your chosen breed. This will give you an idea of the differences between them; for example, male dogs are generally bigger than females. The only other time this issue is worth considering is when you have another dog at home. Dogs of the opposite sex do tend to get on better in the same household than two of the same sex, depending on individual characters. Another important factor to consider if you have two or more dogs is to get either one or all of them neutered. This will prevent any unwanted puppies, can prevent mammary and testicular cancer and can help behaviour problems, especially in male dogs.

Age

Consider very carefully whether you want a puppy or an older dog. The younger the dog is, the more active it is likely to be. A young dog is also more likely to have less than perfect manners; people often take on puppies without doing the proper research. Once the 'cute' stage has worn off, or the puppy has become too big or too boisterous, it is often neglected or handed in to a rescue centre. While a younger dog will be less set in its ways, dogs of all ages are very adaptable and most will fit in eventually. You can teach an old dog new tricks, but it may take slightly longer. Older dogs tend to be calmer and require less exercise, which may be an advantage if you are elderly yourself. They will be more likely to tolerate being left at home for short periods of time while you are at work and they should be used to living as a pet dog.

Coat type

Every different type of dog – and there are many – has a different amount of hair, of varying length. Consider what type you would like and can care for. Would you prefer a long-haired dog that would require daily grooming to prevent unwanted matting and to get rid of loose hair, or would you find it easier to cope with a short-haired dog that will only require grooming once a week? Even if you have an allergy to dog hair there are certain breeds – such as the poodle – that are non-shedding.

Temperament traits

Good with children?

This is obviously one of the most important considerations if you have children or grandchildren, or if other children visit you on a regular basis.

Bear in mind that children vary enormously and a dog that has been brought up with older children may not be able to tolerate the rough and tumble of toddlers. Some dogs may be wary of teenagers, especially if they have previously had a bad experience. Different dogs will have different tolerance levels to things that children are likely to do, so if you have loud, boisterous children you will need a dog that can tolerate this. Make a family decision about what age groups of children your dog can interact with on a regular basis.

Good with pets?

If you have a cat or a smaller pet, you will need to select a dog that does not want to chase everything that moves. Cats, especially, can suffer from the unwanted attentions of a new dog and may take to living outside because they don't feel safe indoors and may not feel happy or comfortable enough to return to the house at all. Selecting a dog that will quickly settle in with a cat is not easy, but it should obviously be a major consideration if you do have a cat.

Good with strangers?

Consider how many people visit you and your family during your daily lives. This will tell you how important it is for your new dog to be unafraid of and sociable with people.

If you live a quiet life in a fairly isolated area, it will matter less if your dog is a bit unsociable. However, if you live in a busy household with plenty of visitors, you will need a dog who is relaxed and happy with people in a wide range of social situations.

Good with other dogs?

There are two issues to consider: how important is it that your new dog gets on with another dog in the family or one that you have visiting regularly? Secondly, how important is it that he gets on with other dogs when out on walks?

Most dogs will tolerate another dog that they have regular contact with, particularly if they are introduced properly. However, being sociable with other dogs you meet outside requires your dog to have more social skills. Living with a dog that is afraid, anxious or aggressive in the company of other dogs could be very hard if you live in a built-up area and intend to walk in a busy park.

How energetic?

Living with a dog who is always raring to go come rain or shine is fine if you have lots of spare time and are an active person. If you are not, it might be better to look for a dog who is happy to sleep for most of the day and have minimal exercise – i.e. an older dog. Matching your dog's activity level to your own will prevent a new dog from becoming bored and frustrated through lack of exercise. You will also need to match your desire to play games with your new dog with his desire to play with you. Be aware that dogs with lots of mental and physical energy can find it difficult to settle at home while their owners are out: this can cause destructive behaviour.

How strong-willed?

Pushy dogs get on much better with strong-willed owners and gentle dogs are happier with sensitive people. You need to consider how insistent you and your family will be that your dog conforms to your rules. Dogs with strong characters usually have more spirit, are more confident and independent, and often learn faster. If, however, you are tolerant and indulgent, find a dog who displays sensitive and submissive traits. A strong character may choose to take control once he has assessed your abilities. If you are a sensitive owner a gentle dog should ensure a trusting and close bond that is beneficial to both. Dogs with gentle characters are also often more tolerant of children and other animals.

How cuddly?

Dogs do not naturally hold and hug each other, whereas humans cuddle each other and other animals as an expression of love and affection. Dogs need to learn that humans do this, to tolerate and enjoy it. However, do bear in mind that some dogs enjoy a cuddle more than others. If you are someone who likes to stroke and hug your dog a lot, find one that enjoys it or you may be disappointed when he starts to avoid you when you reach out to him.

How trainable?

All dogs can be trained once you know how, but some learn faster than others. Be realistic and consider your own experience in dog training. It is always good to seek professional advice or attend dog training classes with your new friend to teach him the basics. If you want a really well trained dog you need to find a dog that is going to be easily trainable and highly food or toy motivated. You will need to be patient and willing to devote a lot of time to train your new dog.

How independent?

Many dogs do not enjoy being separated from their owners. All dogs will have to put up with it once in a while, but if you are planning to leave your dog on a regular basis, look for one who is happy to be left alone for short periods. Dogs that are destructive, noisy or dirty when left alone are usually not happy and it would not be wise to take on such a dog unless you have plenty of time to devote to training the dog out of this behaviour.



Other things to consider

Consider what an average day will be like for your dog and list all the characteristics that would enable him to cope easily with it. For example, if you plan to take him to work every day, he needs to enjoy travelling. Problems relating to car travel can be overcome, but if your dog will be travelling often, it may be more sensible to avoid the problem in the first place.

There are also other things to think about that can influence your decision:

Housetraining

Dogs have a natural instinct to keep their living area clean, but when nature calls and they do not have access to the outdoors, they will relieve themselves on the spot. It is important that this habit is broken early on, but your dog cannot do it alone, so it will be up to you to teach him how. Rescued dogs in particular may need retraining to get back into the routine, even if they have already been housetrained. So, if you don't like the thought of your new dog having accidents in the house while you housetrain him, you should consider looking for a dog that has already been housetrained, although there may be initial accidents.

Spending time alone

While you should never leave your dog on his own for long periods of time, it is important that he learns to spend time alone, and this is something you may have to train him in. Rescue dogs in particular have a tendency to get very clingy and this can lead to all sorts of problems, such as destructive behaviour. You may also need to get your dog used to a routine when you go out of the house, to prevent him getting anxious when he thinks you are leaving. When you do have to leave your dog you will need to make sure that he has plenty of things to keep him occupied, such as toys and chews, and you'll need to remove them when you return. This will avoid idle paws getting into mischief. Start by leaving him alone for short periods and gradually lengthen the time.

Behaviour

As a prospective owner, you will need to be aware of some of the behaviour issues you may come across with your new dog before you take him home. You can then start training and laying down all the important ground rules straight away. Dogs are a lot cleverer than we give them credit for, and many dogs going into a new environment will 'try it on' when their confidence builds up. It's important to realise that your dog is not being malicious, he's just exploring what works and what doesn't. You will need to lay down the ground rules and stick to them, even if you feel you are being a bit harsh with the new member of your family.

He may also try attention seeking tactics such as barking, jumping up, mouthing and chewing things in front of you. You will need to research how to deal with these types of behaviours before you take your dog home.

Basic training

It is very important that you make sure that your dog knows the acceptable way to behave, and for you to teach him how to behave in certain situations so he does not endanger himself or anyone else. As a new dog owner, you will need to focus on certain training exercises to begin with, and you may also need to take your new dog to training classes. Initially, he will need to learn:

- how to sit, so you have control over him and can calm him down when he's meeting new people or being checked over.
- recall, so he comes back to you every time he is called.
- how to walk on a lead. No matter how good you think your dog is, a sudden sight or sound may cause him to run away, putting himself and others in danger.
- how to play properly. Interacting with you should be fun, but first he needs to learn to return to you and happily bring toys back without any confrontation.

You will need to keep training consistent. Many dogs get confused as rules change and change depending on different people. This can cause problems with a new dog and his relationship with his new owners. Children and visitors need to know the ground rules and you need to keep an eye on them, or your hard work could be undone.

Grooming

Grooming should be an essential part of your dog's daily routine. It plays a major part in building a bond between a dog and its new owner. It is important to get a dog used to being groomed straight away so you can keep your dog's coat clean and shiny while checking for any lumps or matted fur. If you don't think you have the time to invest in daily grooming then you need to make sure you choose a dog that will not need as much attention.

Cost issues

To keep your dog safe, happy and healthy you must be prepared to invest in food, toys, pet identification, collars and leads, bedding, veterinary fees – including regular flea treatment, wormers, and yearly vaccinations – as well as neutering, pet insurance and training classes. You may also need the services of dog walkers, boarding kennels during holidays and grooming parlours.



Responsible dog ownership

Apart from the dog's attributes, you also need to ask yourself about your own – can you be a responsible dog owner? Aside from taking proper care of your dog, investing time in training and exercise, feeding him the right way and keeping him healthy and away from harm, there are a number of things you will need to do to be a responsible owner.

You must ensure that your dog is always properly identified with a collar and ID tag displaying your contact details, including your address and telephone numbers. Another very effective form of identification is to microchip your dog. It is a quick and painless procedure where an identification chip is inserted into the scruff of the dog's neck. This chip will hold a unique number corresponding to your dog only – so if he should ever go missing he can be scanned for a chip number and immediately traced back to you when he is found. One thing to remember: if you ever change address you must always update your records.

When out and about with your dog, you must always remember to carry a supply of poop scoops. Responsible dog owners have a duty to clear up after their dog; there are no excuses. If you fail to scoop the poop, you may be forced to pay a fine.

It is not only a legal requirement that dogs are kept on leads in public places, but also a very good idea – no matter how good you think your dog is, a sudden sight or sound may cause him to run away, putting himself and others in danger. As a responsible dog owner you should always keep your dog on a lead unless you are in an area where it is safe to let him off the lead.

And finally...

This information is not meant to try and put you off taking a dog, but we hope it will help you to make an informed decision that leads to a long and happy relationship.

There are many places to get a dog, but please make sure that you choose your new dog from the best source. We'd recommend a well-known rescue organisation such as Battersea Dogs & Cats Home where experienced staff can help you find a dog that is suitable for you and your family. If you do go to a breeder, make sure they are reputable. Do your research beforehand and always ask to see the mother and father of the litter.

Whatever dog you decide to get, or wherever you get him from, the most important thing to remember is that this relationship is for life, and hopefully your dog's life will be a long one. In taking on a dog you are taking on a long term commitment – make sure you're ready for it.

Recommended reading

The Rescue Dog

by Gwen Bailey

Puppy Handbook

How to choose and educate the right puppy for you
by Gwen Bailey

Second Chance

Living with a Rescued Dog
by Judy and Larry Elsdon

How to Teach a New Dog Old Tricks

by Ian Dunbar

Specific Breed books can be found in either your local library or pet shop.

