

Be Prepared for Your Dog

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During my dog training career, I've discovered that the number one reason a client comes to me for help is because they were unprepared for their dog. This is also the number one reason a dog is taken to a shelter. Lack of preparation comes in many forms, from the first-time dog owner that hasn't done their research to the person that gets a breed they know nothing about and is not ready to take on the unique challenges that breed brings. Many people who are unprepared end up with high expectations that their dog is simply incapable of meeting, leading to disappointment for the owner and frustration for the dog.

Here is a simple outline to help you be prepared for the dog you ultimately bring home. It will help you choose an individual dog, but it should also prepare you for what to expect and what not to expect.

First, **remember that a dog is a living, breathing, behaving animal.** Don't fall for the “be seen and not heard” attitude that causes people to have unrealistic expectations of their dogs. This attitude didn't work well raising our children, why should it work well raising an animal that already struggles to fit into human society? Just like all living creatures, dogs will behave. They will run around, make noise, play, defecate, eat. They have been built for survival: to always be seeking out their needs, whether it be food, water, shelter, or play. Yes, play. Because...

The second rule is to **remember that dogs are dogs:** they are social animals. Play is an absolute requirement for their survival, and they will seek it out. And I don't mean “alone time,” I mean play time with other animals, like you. You can't stick a dog in a backyard, or even inside a house, and expect them to entertain themselves all day. You especially can't keep them enclosed for 8 hours and expect them to be well-behaved at the end of the day. If you don't want a playful animal, get a cat. They do not have the extremely social evolutionary history that dogs do, and require less (but still some!) play and attention than their slobbery counterparts.

Next, **pay attention to breed.** I know those small dogs are cute, but are you prepared for the barking? Training can help alleviate the problem but, for many breeds (like terriers!), barking will always be a part of life. It's unfair for you to use training as a tool to create an animal other than the one you, yourself, chose. If you don't like barking, don't choose a barking breed. Similarly, if you want a dog that worships the ground you walk on, don't choose an independent breed like a terrier or a sheep-guarding breed. Both of these were bred for their independence and ability to make their own decisions. If you want a lovey-dovey dog, go for a sheep-herder or a sport dog like a lab. But remember to pay attention to energy requirements. Any breed that was created for an active purpose, like hunting or herding, will have higher energy levels. If you can't handle that, seek out a more mellow breed (usually the larger breeds).

Finally, and most importantly, **look at the individual dog.** Many people have an image in their head of the perfect dog, down to the last detail. Unfortunately, the chances of you finding this perfect dog are slim. Instead, you'll find the near-perfect dog. The trap many people fall into is that of trying to make their near-perfect dog into a perfect dog. They focus on that one aspect of their dog that doesn't fit their ideal and try to change it. They try to force a non-fetching dog to fetch, or a dog with no interest in other dogs to become dog-friendly. Many of these goals are completely unrealistic. So, just as you would accept your children for who they are, accept your dog for who he is. Unless his behavior causes undue stress (such as aggression issues), don't force him into the neat little package you had prepared for him. This also means that, when you choose a dog, you should get as close to the ideal as you can so you don't end up with an extremely imperfect dog. List the most important characteristics you want in a dog, in order. Do NOT give in to the cute faces and waggly bodies. Keep focused on your mission, and you'll end up with a dog that's close enough, a dog you can learn to love and enjoy.

For help choosing a dog that's right for you and your lifestyle, contact me or a positive trainer in your area.