

Where to Adopt a Family Pet: Part One

By Jane Marshall Dog Trainer

So the big moment has come! You have decided to add a dog to your family. You have looked at your lifestyle and you have some idea of what sort of dog you want, but where do you go from here? Do you go to a breeder, a shelter or a rescue group? What about those “free” dogs in the newspaper? Here are a few things to consider when looking for a family dog. This week we will look at the option of purchasing a dog from a breeder.

Breeders vary from large commercial kennels to “backyard” breeders to families who raise occasional litters in their homes. Among these breeders there are good ones and others you should avoid. Doing some research ahead may save you a lot of money and heartbreak.

When choosing your breeder, bear in mind that the early environment a puppy is raised in is crucial to his adult personality. From an early age, puppies should be raised in a home setting (or at least have periods of the day when they are inside). This gives them an opportunity to get used to the sounds and smells of a home. They should be kept very clean and be able to use a bathroom area away from where they are living. Puppies living in dirty situations can be difficult to houstrain later. They should be handled every day by a variety of different people, including children. Raising puppies in isolation, at the bottom of a garden, in a pen, or in a kennel setting with no indoor privileges does not give the puppies the skills needed to be successful in a home environment. Large kennels that produce puppies from several breeds of dogs cannot provide the individual attention that puppies need at this crucial stage. Raising a single litter of puppies is a full time job if you are going to do it well and produce emotionally stable family pets.

Always ask the breeder about the age at which they allow the puppies to leave for their new homes. Seven to eight weeks is ideal. NEVER take a puppy that is under six weeks away from it's mother and littermates; he will miss a period of vital early learning. This is the age their littermates give them good feedback on appropriate play with their teeth. Families who take puppies under this young age continually complain of inappropriate “biting”. Unfortunately this is a common practice with unscrupulous breeders who want to earn money by placing puppies quickly.

However, one of the big advantages of going to a breeder is that you will be able to see the mother dog and, sometimes, even the father. The puppies will have a lot of the characteristics of their parents. If the mother is excessively shy, or aggressive, chances are your puppy will be too. It is not acceptable for the mother dog to show any aggression by guarding her puppies from people. If she is doing that, she may pass this trait along to her puppies. Be suspicious of anyone who will not let you meet the mother dog (this includes people who offer to drive the puppy half way to meet you). Always bear in mind what you are looking for in a family dog. If the mother dog is calm, stable, sociable and pleasant to be with, then raised well by you, the chances are, her puppy will be too. If the

breeder boasts that the mother is a champion agility dog and the father came second at Westminster, ask yourself if you want those genes in a family pet? Are you ready to run an agility course three times before and after work with your new pet?

If you are considering a professional breeder producing several litters or more, ask for references from people who have taken puppies from previous litters. Did they turn out to be good natured dogs? Ask the breeder what sort of hereditary diseases they test for (your vet will give you help with this) and if they have any sort of contract. Good breeders will require that you spay or neuter pet dogs and will offer follow up advice after you have taken the puppy home. They will also take a dog back at any stage of his life, if necessary.

What about AKC (American Kennel Club) papers? "Having papers" does not guarantee either the dog's health or temperament. The AKC acts only as a registry for pure breed dogs. If the parents of a litter of puppies are registered with the AKC, then the litter may be registered with them also. No one checks that these puppies are healthy or sound. The AKC does, however, have a list of National Breed Clubs approved by them. This registry has ethical guidelines for breeders and is a good place to start your search. Other good sources for a reliable breeder are local kennel clubs, obedience clubs and vets offices. Be wary of breeders who advertise in the newspaper, this is a gamble at best; most responsible breeders don't advertise their puppies here.

When you find a breeder you are interested in they should ask you as many questions as you ask them. Good breeders really care about their puppies and which homes they go to. They will be interested in how much time you have to spend with the puppy, whether you are aware of modern training methods, what your home is like, if you have considered carefully the characteristics of this particular breed of dog and whether you can meet those needs. They may require vet references or character references, if you have not had a dog before.

Sometimes, the bigger breeders will have adult dogs they want to place in homes. Before making a commitment, look at how the dog has lived for most of his life. If he or she has been confined to a concrete kennel for five years, you know this is a dog that will require rehabilitation and will only ever be able to deal with low stress living situations. Many retired breeding dogs will be in this category, and that is alright if that is what you are looking for in a dog.

Happily, most people with nice dogs from a responsible breeder have found they have made two new life long friends: the wonderful family pet that now lives with them and the breeder that stays in touch with them!

Next week we will consider adopting a "rescue" dog from a shelter, rescue group or the newspaper