



HOW TO SELECT YOUR PUPPY
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This article is not about how to select a pup, but rather how to select your pup. All puppies are cute and look about the same when they are born. It is when they enter adolescence that their differences begin to emerge. Developmentally, adolescence marks the change from being a pup to becoming an adult dog. Depending on the breed, it can start any time between 6–12 months and end between 18–24 months. During this stage, dramatic neurohormonal changes take place. There are also significant synaptic changes that take place in the brain, especially in terms of maturation of the frontal cortex.

Before Selecting Your Puppy

Dogs are adaptive, flexible, and respond well to training; however, they differ in breed characteristics and individual traits. Before picking the pup that will grow into the type of dog you want, it is important to think about what you are looking for. Consider basic temperament, whether the dog will be an inside or outside dog, and how large it will be when fully grown. Will it have to get along with other dogs? Is it a working dog? A sporting dog? Or is it a protective guard? How much time will it require for playing and training? Many a new owner has been disappointed by picking the wrong breed because he was “so cute” as a puppy, only to end up with a large aggressive dog who destroys the house while the owner is at work.

Consider Dollars and Scents

How much is that doggie in the window? The one with the wagging tail? Before selecting your breed, one factor to consider is the expense of dog ownership. In addition to the initial purchase price, which can vary from zero to several hundreds of dollars, a dog needs food and veterinary care—not to mention the extras—toys, treats, and accessories. Check your budget to make sure the new addition to your family won’t stretch your finances too thin.

Picking Out Your Puppy

When you find yourself peering into a box full of perky puppies, they may all look like the perfect pup. The chances are that one will catch your eye. Maybe it’ll be the biggest, the smallest, the most energetic, or the pup with the soulful expression. First impressions can be very persuasive, but you need to look at the future dog behind the puppy face before you can make a good decision. It may be risky to jump into a long-lasting relationship without asking a few questions first. Before making the choice, consider which canine characteristics will best compliment your lifestyle. A good assessment usually requires some basic temperament testing, seeing pups interact on a few occasions, and even meeting the parents.

Getting the Pick of the Litter

One key to selecting the pick of the litter is taking time to see the pups interact on a few occasions and in a few situations. Is he a playful wrestler, a lone explorer, or a passive pup? How does the pup respond to being picked up and handled? Does he struggle or just go limp? How does he respond to a loud sound? Does he come up to investigate, or does he shy away in fear? Obviously, if you are selecting a working dog that must perform under stress, you are looking for something different than a lap dog who wants to cuddle during a thunderstorm.

Understand Dominance Hierarchy

By seven weeks of age, puppies have begun to develop a perspective of dog world. Each has a unique way of relating to its littermates and to the world around. In dog world, there is a pecking order—or rather a pack order. The beginnings of dog world are defined by a hierarchy of dominance—not of democracy. Dogs are hierarchical—not egalitarian—in nature. Yet there's order in dog world; it's just different than our order. Every dog has a place and acts accordingly. Bright, energetic, and bossy types are usually at the top of the pack. Those with a more laissez-faire attitude occupy the middle level, preferring leisure over leading. More timid types rank lower on the list, by just following others or sitting on the sidelines of the action. There's a place for each of these types. Which type is right for you?

The Alpha Dog: Leader of the Pack

Leaping from the litter and charging forward with confidence, the future Alpha dog is probably the pup you'll meet first. The future Top Dog is not trying to flatter you with his praise—he just wants to be first. He's like that with everyone. Where does the Top Dog explore? Wherever he wants, so be sure to set limits and boundaries from the outset. He loves to play and wrestle, because he always wins, so make sure that your games of tug does not end with him holding the toy. In other words, the Alpha dog needs an Alpha handler, with the perseverance to set limits and the time to train him properly. Without serious training, this potential tyrant can become a difficult family pet who you may not want in your home.

The Beta Dog: He Tries Harder

An energetic wrestler, the future Beta dog spends a lot of time vying for the top and fending off the Top Dog. When he's not under mock attack, the second-in-command spends his time mock-fighting with lower-ranking pups, seeking out adventures, and exploring his surroundings. Confident and active, he's not as pushy as Top Dog, but Battling Beta will often keep vying for the top. He'll keep a close eye on you, and he may take advantage when your back is turned. He's a great pet with an owner dedicated who is to a strong training program.

The Gamma Dog: The Explorer

The future Gamma pup is usually neither fighting for the top nor sitting at the bottom of the hierarchy. Often indistinguishable from others during puppyhood, this dog often seeks a niche that is not occupied by others in the litter. Seeking out adventures, he is quick to respect the territories of others, and he usually enjoys exploring his surroundings. He may specialize in counter-cruising, wandering away from home and getting into what humans call mischief.

The Submissive Dog: Painful Shyness

Most dog experts recognize 3 or 4 hierarchical levels in a large pack, although most packs are very fluid and there is often situational specificity in sex differences in roles. You may find that your heart goes out to the poor little puppy that shows a painful shyness when approached by her more dominant or exploratory littermates. He may play with puppies lowest in the hierarchy, but he will often play by himself. He may be the one chewing in the corner while the others are wrestling as one. The proverbial "needy dog," this dog may be content when curled in your lap. Because he will be easily disturbed by loud noises and sudden movements, he is usually not a good choice if there are children in the home. He'll need special care from a kinder, gentler owner who is patient and understanding. Gentle training methods will help to build his confidence.

First Day At Home

Once you've made your selection, prepare to spend some time introducing your puppy to his first day at home. Some dogs jump right into the swing of things, whereas others prefer a more reserved approach. Try not to compare him to other dogs you've known, and don't worry if he seems to cautious, too energetic, or too anything. If he wants to sleep, then let him sleep by putting him into his crate (or sleep area) with the door open. At dinner, put his food in or near his crate and leave him alone for about 15 minutes. If he doesn't touch his food, that's okay. It's probably just his nerves. After the meal, give him some water and then walk him outside to find a potty place.

Energy in; energy out

When training, remember that dogs often mimic the energy level of the leader of the pack. To get your dog fired up, get excited yourself. To get your dog calmed down, keep calm when you are with her. Because attitude counts when you are doing training, remember that the enthusiasm that you get from your dog during a training session is directly related to the energy you put into the session. Make it a special session filled with emotion, energy, and enthusiasm. On the other hand, never train when you are sick, angry, or tired. Basic training is a lifetime investment because what you put into your dog is what you are going to get out of your dog.¹

Notes

1. Want to know a secret of dog training? Practice *labora at ludere*. Work and play; play and work. Turn your work into play, and turn your play into work. In other words, make your training sessions playful; when your dog is playing, sneak in some training. When your dog is training, reward him with some play.

References

- Doverspike, W. F. (2008). *Training tips for your dog*.
http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/training_tips_for_your_dog.pdf
This article consists of 50 tried and true dog training tips that helped the author earn a total of 15 titles in four different canine sports including obedience, agility, field and hunting tests, and Frisbee®.

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About the Authors

Bill Doverspike has enjoyed training dogs and trying to understand the dog's mind since 1970, when he shaped behaviors in a dog as part of an operant conditioning experiment as a freshman in college at Emory University. Bill was involved in various aspects of competitive dog training for 25 years since earning an AKC Companion Dog obedience title (1983) on his first Golden Retriever, Apollo of Westchester, also known as Chester. Bill's best known canine companion was Hunter, a Golden Retriever titled as HR Twin Branch Karma's Hunter, SH, AX, AXJ, UDX3, also known as the "land shark." Hunter also competed in the 2001 IDDHA Canine Disc World Championship and earned a total of 15 titles in four different canine sports including obedience, agility, field and hunting tests, and Frisbee®. Before everyone and his brother had a so-called emotional support dog (aren't all pets support animals?), Hunter was a certified therapy dog. He was a member of Happy Tails (Atlanta), Therapy Dogs of Georgia, and he earned a Therapy Dogs International (TDI) active title by completing over 100 hours of volunteer animal-assisted activities.

When living in dog world, Bill worked with approximately 20 dogs a week as an Instructor at Canine Capers Dog Training Club in Norcross and at Sirius Dog Agility Training Center in Atlanta. When not training dogs, Dr. Bill works as an adjunct professor and psychologist who is board certified in Clinical Psychology, Neuropsychology and Medical Psychotherapy. He is a former President of the Georgia Psychological Association.



Bill and Hunter at AKC Hunt Test (April 03, 1999)



Hunter clearing Triple Jump at AKC Agility Trial (2003)



Bill and Hunter on the dock at the lodge (August 16, 2006)

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Published March 10, 2006 | Updated Sept. 30, 2024

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Content and references last reviewed 2024

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2006). *How to select your puppy*.
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