

Selecting The Right Pet For You

Puppies and kittens are babies. All babies are cute, cuddly and fun to watch whether they're playing or sleeping. It's wonderful to watch a baby grow, explore and learn. However, we can't predict what kind of personality that baby will have as an adult. It's impossible to look at the rows of human babies in a hospital nursery and know who will be athletic or academic, quiet or talkative, high- or low-energy, artistically or mechanically gifted, sociable or a "loner."

Many physical traits of certain types or breeds of dogs and cats can be fairly predictable. Some are good traits like size, coat and hair types, and some are bad, such as over-breeding, health problems and so forth. Some have general personality traits: retrievers like to have things in their mouths; terriers like to dig; and Siamese-type cats tend to be very talkative. These traits can be predicted to a limited degree, however, it's hazardous to make too many assumptions about any infant's individual personality based solely on what traits his or her "group" is expected to have.

Each baby, whether human, canine or feline, will develop into an individual with a unique personality and special characteristics all their own. Their personality will be based on some inherited and some learned traits, and that combination is what makes each individual unique. When we choose our friends, we look for certain characteristics that fit into our lives, traits we share, and attitudes that help us mesh. Physical characteristics may play a part in those choices, but the real "click" comes from those combined traits that are unique to each individual. The same is true when we choose pets to share our lives with us for ten to 20 years.

How do I decide what age pet is right for me? Many people assume that puppies or kittens are the only "right" age for a new pet to be introduced into the family, when in fact, an older pet is more suitable for many situations. There are important differences between the needs and abilities of adult dogs or cats and puppies or kittens. Puppies and kittens learn many of their most important skills, such as how to be a dog or a cat, from their mothers and littermates until they're ten to twelve weeks old (see our handouts: "General Developmental Stages of Puppy Behavior" and "General Developmental Stages of Kitten Behavior"). Baby animals taken from their families before that age need specialized lessons and care. Just because they can eat grownup food doesn't mean they have grown up. However, those first few weeks aren't the only time for learning.

The first six months of life are vital to the development of puppies and kittens and require a lot of time, care and energy. Many households are not able to provide what is needed during this busy period of high-rate learning and growing. Baby animals that are not properly taught and cared for during this time find it difficult to develop the proper social skills. Depending on the type of cat or dog, most pets can be considered "teenagers" or young adults from six months to 16 months old. These puppies and kittens are still growing and developing through adolescence, but are beginning to show the direction that their individual personalities will probably take. They're still high-energy "kids" at this stage and will test your patience at every turn.

Every pet has a history, no matter how young or how old. Some animals come with details about their backgrounds, and some have histories that remain mysterious. A pet of any age can bond with the people who love and care for him, giving as much to the relationship as he receives in return. Some animals may have very negative memories of humans who mistreated them, and need extra time to adjust and to learn to trust. The majority of adult cats and dogs, however, can bond with their new families as deeply as puppies or kittens raised from babyhood.

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If you're looking for a pet with certain personality traits, it's more likely that you'll find the right companion to fit your lifestyle if the candidate is at least six months old. If you don't have the patience or energy for a teenager, you should consider an adult dog or cat that is at least one year to eighteen months old. Dogs and cats this age learn quickly, have more coordination and control over their physical functions, and have more predictable natures.

You must first decide if you have the time, energy, space and money for a pet – it's a huge commitment (see our handout: "Is This the Best Time to Adopt a Pet?"). You then need to determine whether a baby animal or a mature pet is more appropriate for your lifestyle and your expectations for this new member of the family.

To help you weigh the "pros" and "cons" of adopting a dog or cat versus a puppy or kitten, ask yourself these important questions:

- How much time do you spend at home on an average day? Puppies and kittens need more physical and emotional involvement with their people than you can give if you are away from home more than six hours a day (see our handouts: "Housetraining Your Puppy," "Dealing with Normal Puppy Behavior: Chewing" and "The Educated Dog"). Most adult pets can easily adjust to your schedule, however, they also need time to learn what is expected of them. Some dogs never grow accustomed to being left alone. If all of your family members are away from home more than eight hours most days, a dog may not be the appropriate choice for your household, and you might want to consider adopting an adult cat (or two) instead.
- Are there children in my home? How many? How old? While many families think they want "a pet for the children," it actually takes a very special combination of parent/child/pet to have a successful relationship. If the child is under six years old, the pet should be over four months old. Puppies and kittens play roughly, and without careful supervision and training, both your child and your pet could have a bad experience with potentially serious consequences.

An adult pet is usually past the stage of becoming overly excited, and you can better gauge how hardy and tolerant he'll be toward childish enthusiasm. It's your responsibility, to your pet and to your child, to monitor their interaction. You can help to strengthen the relationship between your pet and child by showing your respect for your pet's needs and feelings. Teach by example that your pet is an important family member, not a "plaything" to be neglected and tossed away when no longer new and exciting.

While a family pet offers children a wonderful opportunity to learn about caring and responsibility, regular pet-care duties need to be carefully supervised by an adult. A child should never be solely responsible for a pet. You also need to keep in mind that your child's life and interests will change over the next ten to 15 years. The ultimate responsibility for a pet's care and safety is that of the adults in the household.

- Will this pet be a companion to another pet? It's best to introduce a younger animal to an adult resident pet in your household, but not too young. Your resident cat or dog may respond to a very young kitten or puppy as prey to be hunted. In addition, the older pet may not like the constant bother and play. Very young pets lack the social graces to read your older pet's irritation and the reflexes to escape if the situation becomes tense. From four to 14 months old is a good age range to introduce a puppy or kitten to your adult pet.

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Most pets like to have at least one “buddy.” You might want to consider adopting a pair of adult pets that are already accustomed to and attached to each other? Many pets (especially cats) are surrendered to shelters in “pairs” because their human families are no longer able to care for them. There are many benefits to keeping a pair together.

- Do I want a pet that will participate with me in outdoor activities? If you want a dog to take hiking and camping, to play ball or swim in the lake with, or to train to catch flying discs, you should consider a teenage or young adult dog. For major outdoor activities a dog should be a certain size and have natural hardiness. Not all dogs (even retrievers) are naturally inclined toward catching things. This is an excellent example of finding the right combination of traits to fit your particular criteria.

In addition, dogs that are involved in these types of activities must have excellent manners, and you must be willing and able to build a strong relationship with your dog, including ongoing obedience training. Many pets, like many people, don’t travel well. Some reasons for chronic carsickness can be remedied, but if you specifically want a pet to travel with you to local activities or on short vacations, don’t expect miracles from a young animal. There is no way to tell which pet will have the stomach for it.

- Do I want a “lap-pet” that will be physically affectionate and cuddly? Most puppies and kittens will accept some physical affection, but they don’t all grow up to be pets that like to be cuddled. This is another good example of a specific personality trait, which if it’s important to you, will be easier to find in an adult animal.
- Do I prefer a certain physical appearance, coloring or coat? If you like big cats, shiny dogs or fluffy coats, you can do some “educated guessing” with a puppy or kitten, but you’ll still be guessing. By the time a cat or dog is about six months old, these physical traits will be clear, plus you’ll be able to see what kind of personality traits go along with the “package.”
- How large is “too large” for my lifestyle? If you’re renting your “home,” you’ll want to check the pet policies in your rental contract or lease -- especially regarding size limitations. Puppies and kittens grow up, and believe it or not, thousands of puppies and kittens lose their homes each year because someone didn’t think about what their adult size might be. If you have a specific size in mind for your ideal pet, it’s not a good idea to guess. By the time cats and most dogs are six or seven months old, you can usually tell what size they’ll be when they’re fully grown. Many large dogs are surrendered to animal shelters because they were cute, little, fluffy puppies one week and big, clumsy, enthusiastic teenagers the next. It takes time to teach any dog basic manners, like not to pull on the leash, not to jump on people and not to play too roughly, and even more time and patience with a puppy.

You can benefit from someone else’s poor planning if you adopt an adult or teenage dog, but only if you’re willing to do what they did not - teach him the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. This training may take weeks or months, but it can begin very simply with a dog over six months old that’s ready and able to learn quickly, and has good muscular coordination and some knowledge of social skills.