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### **The Family Dog: Decisions and Deal-breakers**

I am often asked to advise individuals looking for a good family dog. Too often, however, these individuals are really asking me to help them find the *perfect* dog: playful, but obedient; protective, but friendly; energetic, but gentle; confident, but not aggressive. They are looking for a dog that will fit effortlessly into their family's life. Such a dog does not exist. Bringing a dog into a home with children requires a great deal of time, effort, and commitment.

#### **It's a Contract**

When you adopt or purchase a dog you are in essence creating a contract with this dog that you will meet his or her needs for food, exercise, companionship, medical care, safety, and training. This dog did not choose you; you chose to bring this dog into your family. You have an obligation to fulfill his or her needs emotionally and physically.

- Minimum of 1 hour per day of attention, exercise, and training
- Cost of food
- Cost of vaccinations, checkups and other and medical care
- Cost of boarding or pet-sitting when needed
- Changes to your schedule to accommodate the dog's need to go out at regular and predictable times.
- Adjustments to your home and yard to create a safe and healthy environment

Once the excitement of having a cute new puppy or dog has worn off, you must fulfill these needs for the lifetime of the dog.

**Do you have the time and energy to add significant and ongoing responsibilities to your already busy schedule?**

**Love Is Not Enough**

When I am asked for advice on choosing a family dog, my first question is always, “How are your kids with dogs?” The answer is almost always the same: “My kids love dogs!” Well, that’s not really the answer to the question. Your children may love to be around dogs, but do dogs love to be around them? In other words, do your children understand and respect the basics of interacting with dogs?

Even toddlers can and should learn that pulling ears, tails and other body parts is not acceptable. Neither is kicking, pushing, jumping on, “riding,” or hitting a dog. In addition, children should not bother the dog while he is eating, put their hands in his food bowl, or take his chew toys away from him. These rules are vital both to the well-being of the dog and the safety of your family.

Before you bring a dog into your home, realistically determine whether all members of your family, at all ages, can understand these guidelines and can interact appropriately with a dog.

**Are your children ready to learn and follow new and non-negotiable rules?**

### **Respect Personal Space**

Especially in busy family households, it is important to make sure your dog has its own personal space to retreat if it wants some alone time. You may already have considered the space you will need for your dog to play and run. Do not forget the space a dog needs to rest and regroup. The uninterrupted commotion of family activity can create stress in a dog. Stress is generally followed by undesirable behavior. An area where the dog can take a quiet break is vital. Once that area is established, children should be taught to respect that space and leave it alone.

**Do you have room in your home to give the dog the space he needs?**

### **Stay Safe**

If you bring a new dog into your home, you will need to observe your children of all ages over a period of time to ensure that they are interacting appropriately. Children generally do not follow rules the first time they learn them. You will need to invest the time, energy, and patience to teach and reinforce the rules until your children can follow them reliably and consistently. Children who are too young to understand or follow the rules should not be left alone with the dog.

Whenever I hear that a dog has bitten a child, I wonder where the adult was in the time leading up to the bite. In the majority of cases, the dog doesn't just "snap." Rather, the bite is a reaction to a situation that has been building over time. Even the gentlest dog has the potential to react in defense when startled, frightened, or in pain. Before bringing a dog into your home, evaluate the amount of vigilance that will be required to keep everyone safe while both children and dogs learn the rules.

**Do you have the time, energy, and patience to supervise the children and the dog while they learn how to behave safely around each other?**

### **You Can't Change Temperament**

Most people who ask for my advice spend a lot of time considering the natural tendencies of various breeds. My professional recommendation is that anyone considering bringing a dog into the home should spend at least as much time evaluating the natural tendencies of their family members. If your children frequently test the limits of existing household rules, they are not likely to follow new rules related to a dog. Don't intensify an already stressful situation by adding a dog to the mix.

**Do your family members have the temperament to make the adjustments to their lives that a family dog requires?**

### **Conclusion**

Not every family should have a dog. Take an honest look at your family members, your schedule, and your current situation. If at this time your family doesn't have the energy, patience, or inclination to adjust to the many changes a dog brings, then having a dog in your home will not be the safe, healthy, and loving experience it is meant to be.