

Pick the Perfect Pet for You

Before you pick a pet, keep in mind that the pet is a commitment that you have for its entire life. For large breed dogs, that can mean 10 or more years; for a smaller breed, it can be 15 years or more. Cats may live up to 20 years. Pets require continued daily investment of your attention and energy. Do not acquire a pet of any kind if your decision is based on frivolous needs or spontaneous urges. Put yourself in the animal's place.

So you decide you do want a pet. Here's what comes next: Dog? Cat? Or something else? Don't be misled by popular misconceptions that all cats are antisocial toward people or that no one should have a dog unless they own a house with a yard. Neither should you limit your options to a dog or a cat. You might find great companionship in a pet rabbit, bird, or an aquarium of fish. Be openminded and consider all the options.

Here are some important points to think about:

- A pet dog requires a bigger investment of time and energy than does a cat. Regardless of size or breed, a dog should be walked on a leash for a minimum of 20 minutes at least twice daily. It is not enough to let it out into the backyard, nor can it be allowed to roam unsupervised in the neighborhood.
- A dog must be taught acceptable behavior as soon as it enters your home. Puppies should begin obedience training and social interaction (with other pets, children, and adults) from the very start. Obedience training should be practiced daily. Dogs make wonderful pets if they are given ample opportunity for the exercise, play, and social interaction with their owners.
- If you are a first-time pet owner, a large-breed dog is probably not the best choice. A smaller dog will be easier to manage so that you can perfect your obedience skills and acquire experience.
- The approaches to raising dogs of any size are identical. Train a small dog the same way you would train a large one. You would not want a Great Dane to jump on your guests, so don't tolerate this behavior in a Lhasa Apso. Read tips about stopping a dog from jumping.
- Although most dogs will enjoy playing with people, cats can generally amuse themselves. Most cats enjoy interacting with their owners but are often content to play alone.
- Though their activities can be more solitary, cats thrive on attention and social contact with their owners. Cats have a very different social nature from dogs. Cats tend to be more discreet and unassertive than dogs, but they can be as attentive and responsive as any dog. A cat's relatively small size and independent nature make it an attractive candidate for small living quarters and busy households.

Male or female?

- Male cats and dogs tend to be larger than females and may be more active in general. Females may be easier to training and less destructive. Females may not play as roughly as males, but both sexes are equally playful. Males tend to be more aggressive toward other males in particular, and aggressive behavior may be more easily provoked.
- Male dogs may be less tolerant of children. Dominance aggression in male dogs is more common. That does not mean that females can't be aggressive or are always calm and sweet tempered, nor does this suggest that male cats or dogs are not responsive to their owners.

- There is probably no difference between the sexes in territorial aggression or the demand for affection. The decision between a male and female is one of your preference. The fundamental guideline is to choose a healthy pet with a good temperament.

Evaluating the litter

- Avoid selecting a pet that remains extremely shy and intolerant to handling over more than one visit. An overly anxious pup, for example, is most likely to remain so as an adult. The most assertive pup of a litter is likely to become extremely dominant as an adult. If you choose a pet that displays any temperamental extremes, be prepared for lifelong challenges.
- Testing a puppy's temperament during the first few months of life can be misleading. Pups go through phases of development that are largely influenced by their environment. A pet's earliest experiences influence it throughout its lifetime.
- Look for the pet that has the traits you desire, but in moderation.
- Have your new pet examined by a veterinarian within seven days after adoption from TCHS.

Checklist for Pet Selection

Before adopting a pet, consider:

- Motivation (whim or well-planned goal)
- Financial investment (short-term, long-term)
- Required changes (removing valuable objects, tolerating occasional accidents, placing screens on windows to prevent escape)
- Adult size (small, medium, large)
- Breed characteristics, physical attributes (activity level, hair length)
- Gender
- Time and energy for pet's daily maintenance (exercise, grooming, play, affection)
- Municipal and state regulations regarding pets
- Your previous experience (basic obedience training, house training)
- A secondary caregiver (if you leave on vacation or become ill)

Source: Canine and Feline Behavior Problems, Second Edition