Is a Dog Right for Your Family?

A dog can help teach children responsibility – but it’s not the right decision for every family.

by Sarah Fox

When you make the decision to adopt a dog, you are adopting a new member of the family. Dogs are wonderful – they are loyal, good companions, and are always excited to see you when you come through the door. They can also be expensive, needy and owning one can change your entire lifestyle. Being an ethical and responsible dog owner is more than just loving a cute, new puppy; it is a serious long-term commitment for the whole family.

BUDGETS, SCHEDULES AND OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Before you make the decision to welcome a dog into your family, it’s important to look at your family’s budget and see if it can handle a new furry addition. “Ensure you can afford to properly care for your dog,” Bonnie Oda of the Hawaiian Humane Society says, “The average cost of properly caring for a dog can run from $1,100 – $3000 annually. Expenses can include veterinary care, food and treats,
Research a potential dog’s size, exercise requirements, friendliness and aggression. And if a dog isn’t the right fit for your family – the Humane Society adopts cats as well.

boarding, training and grooming.”

Another thing to consider is how much time you have to devote to the care of your dog. If the family is out of the house for long periods of time every day, or travels frequently, a dog may not be right for you. Are you ready for the lifestyle change that comes along with pet ownership? All dogs need physical activity to stay healthy and stimulated, and you must have room in your family’s schedule to walk the dog every day. When dogs don’t have enough exercise and interaction, they can quickly become destructive.

“Dogs appreciate opportunities to interact with people and other animals,” Oda explained. “A dog left alone or tied up suffers, and it can lead to serious psychological and behavioral issues. Your dog wants to be part of the family.” She recommends taking time each day for activities like talking walks, playing with toys, petting and grooming.

If you have the time and money, it’s time to take a look at your living situation. Are dogs allowed where you live? How much noise will be tolerated by your neighbors? Do you have space for the dog? The Hawaiian Humane Society recommends keeping dogs indoors if possible. If you have an outdoor dog make sure that they have adequate shelter from the weather and access to food and fresh water.

**HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT DOG**

Almost any dog breed can become a loving and lifelong companion, but there are some breeds that will be better suited to your family than others. Once you’ve decided that you’re going to get a dog, do your research on the various breeds of dogs that are out there. Involve the whole family in selecting the pet. Do research together, and let all of the family members give their opinion on which type of dog is best.

Start by deciding on the appropriate size for your family. Larger dogs will require more space, so your choices of dogs may be restricted by your living space. Take into consideration the temperament of the breeds you look at and your family’s lifestyle. For example, if you live in a tiny apartment, a large dog may not be the best choice. However, if you’re an avid runner, or have a large family with lots of time to play with the dog, it could be fine.

Research a potential dog’s size, exercise requirements, friendliness and aggression. Also be sure to choose a dog that is compatible with children.

Although puppies are adorable, consider adopting a slightly older dog, especially if you have very young children. “Young adult and older dogs are often a good choice for adoption. Their temperament and size are already determined, they are not as demanding as puppies, and they may already be house trained,” Oda says. She added that dogs are adaptable creatures, and will grow to love their new families at any age.

Once you’ve decided on the type of dog that you want, think about adopting a pet from your local shelter. Shelters have all types of dogs, ranging from small to large, and they have both purebreds and poi dogs. “The Hawaiian Humane Society takes in about 70 animals every single day of the year. There are so many homeless animals,” Bonnie Oda told me. If you adopt through the Humane Society your dog will receive a free veterinarian exam within two weeks of the adoption. Dogs also receive a microchip ID, initial vaccinations and are spayed or neutered before adoption.

If you do decide to buy your puppy from a breeder or pet store, make sure that the parents are healthy and live in good
conditions. Go through ethical breeders, and do not buy a dog from someone who will not let you visit the puppy’s parents, as chances are they are kept in poor conditions or are from puppy mills.

BRINGING YOUR NEW PET HOME

Prepare your house for your new arrival before you bring your dog home. Make room for him to eat and sleep, and have a collar, ID Tag and leash ready to go. Take the time to pet-proof your home, and remove electrical cords and wires from where dogs can chew on them.

Sharman R. Elison, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine and President of Hawaii Veterinary Medical Association says, “Obtaining a dog requires the family to embrace the project together.” She recommends taking the time to sit down with your children and discuss the realities of pet ownership, both the good and bad. Help your kids to understand that a dog is a living thing that also has needs, and show them how important it is to care for the dog that they will grow to love.

According to a survey from the American Pet Product Association, the majority of pet owners believe that dogs teach their kids to be more responsible. Younger kids can be responsible for keeping the dog’s water dish full and can help brush the dog. Older kids can be in charge of measuring food or walking the dog. They can also help with training, and it can be a great experience to allow them to come to training classes with you and the dog.
Of course, even responsible children will make mistakes, so be aware that the dog’s care is ultimately going to be your responsibility. However, even the mistakes your children make can be educational, if you use them to come up with a plan for how to care for the dog better in the future.

The whole family can take care of the dog together by going on walks, playing fetch or just rolling around. This is not only a great chance for everyone to get some exercise and fresh air, but it also facilitates spending time together in a fun way.

**HAVING A DOG IN HAWAII**

"Dogs with short hair coats that like to swim are perfect for life in Hawaii."

**MOST COMMON DOG BREEDS IN HAWAII**

"The ultimate most common dog breed in Hawaii is the ‘Pol’ or mixed breed dog," Dr. Ellison says. Bonnie Oda agrees, "There are lots of options, the best of which is a pol dog."

*Popular breeds in Hawaii include:*

**SMALL BREEDS**
- Chihuahua
- Shihztzu
- Dachshund
- Cavalier
- King Charles Spaniel
- Boston Terrier
- Pomeranian
- Silkie Terrier
- Yorkshire

**MEDIUM BREEDS**
- Beagle
- Jack Russell Terrier
- Corgi

**Large Breeds**
- German Shepherd
- Pitbull
- Staffordshire Terrier
- Doberman
- Labrador Retriever
- Golden Retriever

"In many ways there are fewer concerns for dog owners in Hawai‘i in terms of diseases as compared to the Continental US," Dr. Ellison says. Hawai‘i is free of rabies, Lyme disease, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, Foxtails, salmon poisoning and systemic fungal disease. Leptospirosis, a bacterial disease, is a concern in our state but it can be kept under control with vaccinations. Our climate also supports the presence of heartworm and intestinal parasites, but monthly medication can manage these problems.

Our moderate climate allows many breeds of dogs to flourish here, but there are a few types of dogs that will not fare as well. Breeds with short noses, such as Bulldogs, French Bulldogs and Pugs, are prone to overheating. The weather is also not ideal for arctic dogs with thick coats like Samoyeds, Huskies and Malamutes. If the breed you choose has thinner hair take caution that they don’t get sunburned. Dogs with short hair coats that like to swim are perfect for life in Hawaii.

Choosing whether or not to adopt is a big decision that should be carefully thought out, and puppies shouldn’t be purchased on a whim. Your children may beg and plead, and promise they will be the ones caring for the dog, but the adults in the family will be responsible for another living creature. Most dogs will live 15-18 years, so your dog may still be with you when your children go off to college. If you plan to move off-island at any point, transporting your dog can be a financial burden, and you should prepare for these expenses. Be sure that you are up to the challenge of taking care of your pet through the economic and emotional ups and downs of your family.