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Pick a Puppy – Any Puppy??

Spring has sprung and along with it, so have the puppies. It's the time of year when there is no shortage of puppies to pick from but there's a lot to consider before you do. And it's really important stuff, both for you and your puppy. I know it's almost impossible to resist that sweet little face, those beautiful eyes and, well, how much cuter can a puppy get? And in a moment of an overpoweringly melting heart we hear ourselves say "I'll take this one!" O.K., people...Just back away from the puppy!

The worst way to pick out a puppy is by the cuteness factor alone because you're walking into uncharted waters. Just like people, looks are only skin deep (although I realize this is hard to accept!) and you need to dig deeper for the really important issues. Second to that is the "flavor of the day" breed. For instance, Chihuahua's became all the rage when Taco Bell used one to represent their brand. Many people picked up Chihuahuas because of the commercials and what followed was the animal shelters became packed with Chihuahuas that people didn't want anymore. And third - picking a puppy because he reminds you so much of your old dog and you want another one just like him. Dogs are as individual as we are. There will never be another dog exactly like your old one. Your new pup needs to be selected based on his own unique personality and traits.

There's a *lot* more to picking the right puppy for you and your family. Doing your homework will prepare and educate you before you get sucked in by seeing and playing with that sweet little bundle of fur! So before you even *think* about leaving the safety of your home to look for a puppy, stop and check out the following.

Why do you want a dog? Do you want an exercise buddy? A companion for your kids? You're single and want a dog to come home to? Do you want to show your dog? Do you want a dog for protection? This question needs to be answered first in order to help you pick the right dog. After all, if you want a dog to go running with you, a Dachshund definitely isn't your best pick!

How much is that doggy in the window? A dog is a commitment for the entirety of its life, which is usually about twelve years or more, and that commitment is both financial and in time invested in care. According to the Wall Street Journal, the average cost of a dog over its lifetime can range anywhere from \$12,000 to \$23,000. If your dog has health problems or gets injured, that cost can jump up to a much bigger number in a blink of an eye. (Trust me – I've been there and have the monthly payments to prove it!) And then there's the time you need to invest in your dog for daily exercise, grooming, food, play and training, to name a few. If you start out with a puppy, the time you need to invest doubles in the first one to two years, at least. Raising a puppy is a lot of work!

The Dating Game, puppy-style. If you could ask a group of prospective puppies, sight unseen, questions to determine which one would be your perfect match, what would you want to know? Will he always

be there for you? Is he big and strong? Does he love to cuddle in front of the fire? Will he love you forever (that's a given!) Seriously, it's important to know what you're really looking for in a dog such as do you want a long haired dog? (That means lots of grooming) A lap dog? A mellow dog? A high energy pup? What size are you looking for? To help narrow this down, check out SelectSmart.com and look for the "Dog Breed selector" questionnaire. It'll get you off to a good start.

Now that you've done your prep work, you can finally trust yourself (somewhat) to go out and take a look at puppies. If you want a purebred, be sure to check out the breeder thoroughly. There are several great breeders out there, but unfortunately, there are many more that aren't. If you decide to purchase a puppy from a pet store or off Craigslist, be aware that many of these are often puppy mill puppies, and as sad as it is, their emotional and physical health have been seriously compromised. So be aware these puppies may always have difficult behavioral issues, which means you have a lot more work ahead of you. When you're checking out a litter, answer the questions below for these signs of a healthy puppy:

Health-wise: Is he alert and energetic? Does he have bright, clear eyes without crust or discharge? Is his breathing quiet and easy with no coughing or sneezing? Does he have any discharge or crust around his nose? Does he look well-fed and have a healthy coat? Is he actively running around? Can he see and hear well?

Personality-wise: Does he play with the other puppies well? Does he seem to be comfortable being handled and being around different people? Has he shown interest in you? Does he guard things? Does he seem happy and interested in playing with the other puppies and you?

Like I said, picking the right puppy is no easy feat! But it's worth all of it in the long run because you're much more likely to find your soul mate, puppy-wise, and you both can look forward to a lifetime of friendship, love and fun!