



CENTRE COUNTY PREVENTION COALITION
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June 23, 2010 – Is the Family Ready for a Dog?

Fred Metzger DVM, DABVP operates Metzger Animal Hospital. This weekly column, published on Wednesdays, is a collaboration of Centre County *Communities That Care* serving Bald Eagle, Bellefonte, Penns Valley, and Philipsburg-Osceola Area School Districts, and Care Partnership: Centre Region *Communities That Care* serving the State College Area School District.

Living with a dog can be very beneficial to children. Dogs can enhance children's self-esteem and teach them responsibility. However, children and dogs are not a guaranteed match made in heaven. Parents **must** be willing to supervise both the dog and the child and teach acceptable limits of behavior. Owning a dog is a major commitment that can be frustrating and fun!

Selecting a Dog

What age is best? If you have a young child and are thinking of adopting a puppy (less than 1 year old), there are a few things you need to consider.

- **Time and energy:** Puppies require a lot of time, patience, training and supervision. They also require socialization in order to become well-adjusted adult dogs. If you have a young child who already requires a lot of care and time, you should ask yourself if you will you have enough time to care for a puppy as well.
- **Safety:** Puppies are fragile creatures and may become frightened, or even injured, by a well-meaning, curious child.
- **Rough play:** Puppies have sharp teeth and claws with which they may inadvertently injure a small child. All interactions between your child and puppy will need to be **closely supervised** in order to minimize the chances of injuries.
- **Advantages of getting an adult dog:** Adult dogs require less time and attention once they've adjusted to your family and household routine. You can work with your local animal shelter to adopt a dog that has previously lived with children.

As a general rule, if your child is under 6 years old, it's best to adopt a dog that's over 2 years old.

What breed is best?

- **Size:** Very small breeds of dogs may **not** be good choices for a young child. These dogs are fragile and may become easily injured when around rambunctious children. Larger dogs or sturdier small breeds are often better able to tolerate the activity, noise and rough play that are an inevitable part of living with children.
- **Breed type:** Some of the sporting breeds, such as Labradors and golden retrievers, can make good pets for families with children. Breeds that have been selected for protective behavior, such as chows and rottweilers, are not usually recommended. Herding breeds, such as border collies, are inclined to "herd" children, chasing and nipping at their heels.
- **Temperament:** While generalizations can be made about specific dog breeds, it is just as important to consider a dog's individual temperament. A dog's personality is shaped by both past experiences and genetics.

In summary, dogs can become treasured family members but selecting the correct dog requires patience and thought. I recommend talking to a certified pet trainer or your veterinarian before adopting any new canine member of the family. I also highly recommend visiting our local shelters and rescue groups and strongly consider helping a dog who really needs our help!

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