

# Choosing a Canine Companion for Your Family

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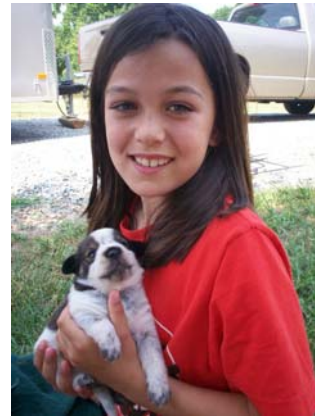
We would all love to find a dog just like Lassie for our children to love. Sometimes we are blessed enough to have a special dog come our way, but usually we have to choose carefully, and train wisely, in order to own a dog that is a safe companion for children. Here is a list of traits to look for, when choosing a family dog:

1. Genetics---being a breed or mixed of breeds that is known for a calmer nature, or being bred by someone who was selecting carefully for a proper companion temperament.
2. The “middle-of-the-road” puppy. Don’t choose the one that backs away or shows fearful tendencies. Don’t choose the leader of the group, the overly confident independent fellow either. Choose a people-oriented pup, yet one that is still calm when being held. (see #4).
3. Well-socialized. A pup who has been with his littermates long enough to develop proper bite inhibition (a minimum of 7 weeks but 9 is even better) and has had contact with people of various shapes and sizes is a better choice than the pup who has been raised in a more isolated environment.
4. The ability to accept restraint. Don’t choose a pup who tries to get away when you hold him in your arms. Lie on the floor and put the pup on your lap, his legs lying across yours, and turn him upside down, tummy up. Rub him gently, keeping him in this position for a few minutes. If he struggles for more than few seconds, bites at your hands, screams and/or kicks, don’t choose this pup for a family with children.
5. A tolerant dog or pup. Gently pull on his ears and tail, pinch his toes and watch his reaction. It is fine if he startles, but he should not reach around and bite at your hand. The best pup for children does not over-react to discomfort and is instantly “forgiving” after it happens.
6. Choose a puppy with good bite inhibition. If the puppy is constantly mouthing your hands, he may have less bite inhibition than other dogs. This can be corrected in many cases, but sometimes indicates a dog that will be more likely to bite when he gets older. Putting a “soft mouth” on your hand, with no teeth, is fine. This is different from a puppy that breaks skin or leaves scratch marks. If the pup nips and actually hangs on to your clothing, or leaves teeth marks on your hand, do not choose this pup for a family with children.
5. Choose the calmer dog. Do not choose a pup or dog that seems the most “driven” by prey or herding instincts unless you are an experienced trainer. These dogs can make excellent working or performance dogs, but are often problematic in a companion dog home. You can test this by bringing along a stuffed toy that is tied to a leash or a 4 ft rope, and pulling it along as you run in front of the pup. Does he show out-of-control behavior when chasing--barking and leaping to catch and “kill” the toy? Or does he just show normal puppy playfulness, running beside the toy and pawing it in a playful manner, or even ignoring the toy if you run away with it? Even though the pup who vigorously shakes and “kills” the toy looks very cute, as does the puppy who runs along nipping at your heels, these pups often have impulse control issues around children. Let the pup have the toy and see if he simply mouths it and rolls on it, or if he starts ripping it and pulling the stuffing out. Highly prey driven dogs can rarely be allowed to play with stuffed toys, because they will destroy them just as they would a cat or small animal if they can catch them. It is also helpful to use a ball or toy that has a very easily triggered squealing noise---throw it and look for the pup who looks a little startled by the noise,



then picks up the toy gently, as if he is trying not to “hurt” it. In Retrievers, we call this a soft mouth and it is an excellent attribute. Also running with this type of toy, while squeaking the toy and squealing in a high pitched voice (the way an excited child might do) is a good test, to determine if the dog becomes frantic with prey drive over things which run and squeal.

6. Sociability & trainability. Choose a pup that follows people around, and will let you lure him into a sit position with a treat. Don't choose the pup which shows no interest in being with you. This is an important test for puppies, but if an older dog is around their present owner, you want to watch for attention to the owner—don't penalize the adult dog if he does not wish to pull his attention away from his owner to play with you. Ask if he has been around children.
7. No Food or Toy Guarding Behaviors. Ask whomever has the dog for sale or adoption to put down a bowl of food that includes something very tasty, like a cut up hotdog, as well as some of what the dog normally eats. Watch for any signs of food aggression, including the dog that begins to gulp his food rapidly when you approach. Carefully reach down to see if you can take it away. A dog that guards resources will be problematic in a home with children. Think about what could happen if he steals one of their toys or grabs their sandwich.
8. Be sure the pup is old enough to go to a new home. The ideal age is 9 weeks for most breeds, but small toy size dogs may need to be as old as 14 weeks before their breeder will let them go. The pup that does not stay with his mother and littermates until at least 7 weeks of age will have less bite inhibition, and be more likely to exhibit behavioral problems as an adult.
9. Purchase or adopt from someone reputable! Just because a dog has AKC paperwork does not mean the breeder is ethical, and just because an organization does animal rescue work does not mean they have experienced foster home volunteers. Take your time and do your homework!



To recap, choose a middle-of-the-road pup, one that is social and wants to be with you, but does not demand attention by constantly biting at you. Choose a playful pup but not one that is so driven he is out of control if you run with a squeaky toy. If an adult dog, watch how he interacts with his foster family or current home.

Don't feel like you have to adopt or purchase the first time you go look for a pet. Keep in mind that this dog will be with your family for ten or fifteen years. Take your time and find a special companion your family can enjoy for many years to come.

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