

# DO YOU REALLY KNOW YOUR DOG?

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Article in *The Union* April 19, 2019

Dogs are often adopted for how they look, but get returned for how they behave. An important contributing factor in forming behavior is the dog's temperament. The temperament of a puppy is determined in the 4th week in utero. Your dog arrives on this planet with a basic nature. That nature can be somewhat molded through training and guidance. However, you will not create an entirely different creature by what you do. In other words you can't adopt a dog for how it looks and then feel that through your direction you can change it's nature. To bring this home to us humans - women who have given birth to more than one child might say "One was so active that it nearly kicked down the walls of my stomach and the other was so quiet you sometimes wonder if it was still alive." You will notice that this temperament in the womb will pretty much be the temperament for those babies throughout their lives.

The temperament of the puppy will be influenced by the conditions that the mother lives in during the pregnancy. Is she eating a good diet? Is she in a calm environment? Of course the dog will be influenced by it's breed. A young lab will most likely be more energetic and approval seeking than a bulldog.

The first six weeks of a puppy's life should be spent with the mother dog. It has been shown that bottle fed puppies can be more difficult than those being breast fed by their mothers. Why is that? Mother dogs are strict task masters. They have very strict rules, that they apply consistently and with swift and direct consequences if the puppy does not follow the rules. Bottle fed puppies have humans for mothers. Humans are more accommodating to the puppy, like they would be with a human baby. The puppy cries - the human says "Are you hungry, are you warm enough, do you want me to walk you around, etc." The puppy can feel a bit more in control and may want to continue that as it grows. We, as humans sometimes spoil our children by bowing to their every wish and command, the same can happen with the puppy. It's not the love and affection provided that causes the spoiledness. It's the lack of clear boundaries and limits and understood consequences.

Even though dogs have different temperaments they can all learn to participate in their world in a good way. All dogs can learn to have manners, just as children can. Any well behaved dog is a more welcome family member or guest than a poorly mannered dog. When considering adopting a dog it is important to spend a little time thinking about who you and your family are and what you like to do. Then meet the dog(s) you are interested in and see if there is a match.

When Sammie, the Shar-pei was a puppy, my best friend adopted a Labrador Retriever, Lucy. Since we both had pups and were good friends we did a lot of things together. One day when the dogs were 1 1/2 years old, my friend said "I'd be broken hearted if Sammie was my dog." I looked at her in shock and said "Why?" Her answer encapsulates exactly the point I am making. She said "He's not adoring enough." I thought for a moment and said "I would probably be driven mad if Lucy was my dog. She's too attention seeking and clingy." Wow! My friend, Kay called us "Sassy Cheryl" and Sweet Kay." Intuitively we had picked out dogs perfect for us and had we reversed the adoptions neither one of us would have enjoyed pet ownership quite as much. I like that independent nature, my friend liked that adoring nature.

Labs are easy to train because they love receiving approval and they love food. Sammie didn't care much about either. So "How on earth was I going to motivate him." I learned that for a squeaky toy I could get him to do anything. As a very observing curious dog those noises really engaged him. If any of you have children, you know that one child will respond and adjust behavior accordingly with just "that look" from you and another child will repeat the poor behavior any time (s)he thinks they won't get caught and will only stop when a strong consequence is provided. Many of the same principles applied to raising children work for guiding your dog.

Breeds of dog do have traits in common, but within the breed, dogs are as diverse in their behavior and character as we are. So if you had a German Shepherd you really liked as a child, don't assume the dog you see that looks like your childhood German Shepherd will behave like it. Just as humans are formed by their childhood experiences dogs are formed by their temperament and their puppyhood. Should you get a puppy or an adult? There are arguments in both directions. A puppy you can train as you see fit, but you may not know exactly who that puppy is. An adult dog is already formed and you get what you see. Can you teach an old dog new tricks? Absolutely. I had a nine year old Queensland Heeler mix who was the star of her class. I have a 76 year old friend who recently received a PhD. We can all learn at any age.

If you're getting a new dog spend some time with it. Ask questions about it. Observe it. If you get the dog at Sammie's Friends we have a very good behaviorist who can help you interpret what you see and determine if the dog is a match for you. Sammie's Friends adoption counselors are also helpful in helping you find the right dog for you. When you adopt a dog you have to consider the dogs temperament and determine if it is a match for you. You must also consider that the dog will take some amount of your time to ensure it is a well behaved member of the family; just like your children take ongoing guidance and leadership to grow into great adults.

If you do these things you will be richly rewarded with the best friend you'll ever have.

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