



## How to Choose a Great Dog (The Checklist)

By David Muriello, 2010

**A great dog** is the one that's great for YOU and YOUR LIFESTYLE. I recently brought home a wonderful 8-month old dog from a shelter. Was it luck? Not really. I knew exactly what I was looking for. After using [Petfinder](#) and talking to a lot of friends and rescue workers, I evaluated several dogs that looked like good candidates. Using my "Choose a Great Dog Checklist," I was able to identify the characteristics I was looking for. Today I'd like to share my method so you can have the same success when you're looking for your next dog.

**The Myth:** Most dogs are the same. We all know the obvious differences like size, energy level, and shed vs non-shed, but other than that, a dog is a dog. Whether or not my dog turns out to be great for me is mostly luck of the draw. I'll find out whether I was lucky or not once I get home with him and we spend a few weeks together.

**The Real Deal:** *Not only* are breed types *very* different, but within every breed type, individual dog personalities are VERY different. You CAN figure out what kind of dog you're getting *before* you bring her home! Follow my "Choose a Great Dog Checklist," and spend time getting to know the dog you are considering. You will greatly increase your chances of finding a dog that is an excellent match for your life.

Again, before we start, remember the best dog is the one that matches up well with *your personality* and *your lifestyle*. Here's how you find him.

### The Overview:

1. Define exactly what you want in your ideal dog.
2. Define exactly what type of dog fits well into your current lifestyle (consider your living space, schedule, activity level, ability to be a leader, and more.). Be realistic.
3. Write out your answers to both points above. Yes, write it out. No, you cannot skip this step.
4. Print the "Choose a Great Dog Checklist" below. Bring it with you to meet your two most important sources of information: 1) the dog, 2) and the person who knows the dog best (the current caretaker for the dog).

5. Use the checklist to evaluate the dog you are considering. Interact with the dog in every way listed. If needed, take notes on what you see.

6. Now go over every item on the checklist with the person who knows the dog best (rescue worker, breeder). Listen to their experiences and opinion. Take notes if needed.

7. Trust your own impression just as much as that of the rescue worker, breeder, or current caretaker.

8. Take your time and be honest with yourself about the results of your evaluation.

9. Make a choice. Wait a sec. Take a deep breath. Now, look at numbers 1 through 8 again carefully. Okay, now make a choice.

(By the way, your choice could be to wait until you meet another dog. That's a perfectly smart choice. There are *a lot* of great dogs out there. More than you could ever imagine.)

## The Choose a Great Dog Checklist

Each item below will give you a characteristic to evaluate, then a listing of example responses to help you “see” the different reactions the dog is displaying. (The entire range of possible responses is not listed.) **Two things to remember:** 1) *If you are uncertain of a dog's response to being touched/examined/hugged, or to being disturbed while eating or playing – do NOT perform those components without the aid of a professional (the rescue worker or breeder should be able to help);* and 2) *If you are unsure how to interpret the behaviors you are seeing in the dog, hire an experienced, impartial, dog professional to assist you in your evaluation and decision-making. Trust me, it's worth it.*

And... trust your gut, on everything.

Okay, here we go. Let's have some fun and get to know some canines. Look at your candidate dog in all of the following categories:

1. **Interest in people (you). Reaction to strangers.** *Friendly, shy, disinterested, scared, aggressive?*

2. **Style of approach to you, then others.** *Respectful, gentle, fearful, jumper, physical, threatening?*

3. **Response to petting and touch.** *Loves it, wants more, could care less, doesn't like?*

4. **If safe, give the dog a hug.** Then try restraining the dog in your arms. *Tolerant, not tolerant, fusses then relaxes?*

5. **Response to body examination.** *Tolerant, not tolerant, fusses then relaxes, threatens you?*

- Lift gums, look at teeth, open jaws
- Look in ears
- Lift, squeeze paws
- Lift, squeeze tail



*Let's See How Hazel Responds to a Gentle Paw Squeeze. Good Girl, What a Sweetie!*

6. **Play drive.** *Chases a toy, grabs the toy, no response to toy, knows how to fetch, response to squeaker?*

7. **Mouth control and bite pressure.** *Bites your hands/clothes, allows you to open mouth easily, bites hard, bites soft, takes treats gently, takes treats hard, has no care for where her mouth goes, controls her mouth precisely?*



*Holding a Toy Over Hazel's Head to Test Play Drive and Mouth Control. She's Waiting Patiently.*

**8. Possessiveness/Resource guarding.** *Relaxed about the removal of food and toys from his possession, shows signs of anxiety or aggression if food or toys are approached or touched? Signs of possessiveness may be subtle. These include: Tenses up, direct stare, turns/runs away, growls, shows teeth, snaps, eats faster, escalates intensity. Non-possessive dogs will be indifferent, relaxed, have a loose body and facial expression.*



*How Does Hazel Respond to Me Putting My Hand on Her Kong Filled with Cheese? She's Cool as a Cucumber.*

**9. Response to stern voice/verbal correction.** *Interrupt an action with your voice. Stops for a second, stops completely and looks at you, cowers, hides, no response, barks at you, growls at you?*

**10. Sensitivity to noise.** *Drop your clipboard on a hard surface or bang a food bowl. Stops for a second, stops completely and looks at you, cowers, hides, no response, barks at you, growls at you?*

11. **Reaction to you running.** Run away from the dog to invite chase. *Chases you, grabs you, jumps on you, barks at you, ignores you?*

12. **Interaction with children.** If you have any, bring them. If not, try to see the dog with other children. *Respectful, gentle, fearful, jumper, physical, threatening, mouthy?*

13. **Dog to dog interactions.** See 3 different types of dogs if you can. *Social, non-social, friendly, knows how to greet politely, does not know how to greet, knows how to play, does not know how to play?*

14. **Dog to cat interactions.** This is a tough one that is not always available. I would still ask and find out as much as you can, especially if you have cats. *Respectful, gentle, fearful, chasing, grabbing, injuring, obsessed, can't distract?*

15. **Walking on leash/outdoors**

- *Pulls you or lags behind/stops?*
- *Pays attention to you or you don't exist?*
- *Response to other people?*
- *Response to other dogs/animals?*
- *Response to environmental stimuli such as cars, loud noises?*

16. **Housetrained/crate trained.** *History of going potty in the owner's chosen place? History of accidents in the wrong places? Any involuntary urination such as submissive or excitement peeing? Response to being separated in their own area such as crate, pen, or separate room?*

17. **Response to separation.** *History of response to being left alone in the home? What happens when someone leaves the room? Has there ever been any separation from littermates or other dog she may have been boarding/living with? (If not, initial transitions are tough, be prepared to work on this.)*

18. **Vocalizations.** By the time you've done all of the above, you should have an idea of this. What kinds of vocalizations did you hear in your evaluation. As always, you will also ask the person who knows the dog best in order to learn about other situations where vocalizations may occur. *Barker, whiner, howler, bayer? Loud or soft? High-pitched or low-pitched? What triggers these vocalizations? Attention-seeking barking? Excitement barking? Territorial? Separation? Etc.*

Okay, so now you have a MUCH better idea of the kind of dog you are considering. How does it match up with the ideal you defined for your personality and lifestyle? Most people are willing to accept or work on a few of the items that don't match up with their ideal. Some characteristics, on the other hand, are deal breakers. For example, a resource guarding dog is not a fit in a house with young children. A very barky dog is a tough fit in a city apartment. Don't be a fool when it comes to those deal-breaking factors. But, for a great all-around dog, you may want to compromise on a few of your ideal characteristics. After all nobody's perfect. Least of all us humans.

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