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information sheet

Choosing the Right Dog

How do I choose the right dog?

The most important thing to remember is that no matter how cute and fluffy they are, you are choosing a dog that will help with your disability and be bomb-proof in public.

Your favourite breed may not be the best service dog for you, and it's important to pick the dog that will help you — not the dog that you always wanted as a child or the dog that you think looks the best.

Your focus when choosing a potential assistance dog should be on picking the dog that is mostly likely to make it to full certified status. If you choose carefully, the time and money you invest in a dog will pay off with a well-adjusted assistance dog who may change your life.

What sort of dog is best for me?

Technically, any breed can be a service dog, though some are more suited for it than others. There is no one best breed for everyone.

When trying to select a dog, make a list of the things you want him to do for you. Think about the ways your disability affects your life and how a dog could help.

One way to do this is to list your symptoms, and ask yourself about each one. Do you want your dog to react to what you react to? Or, do you want your dog to be calm when you are not?

Do you have a problem with a specific maladaptive behaviour? Do you want your dog to stop you from doing the behaviour, or to redirect you to alternative behaviours?

Do you want interaction with your dog to evoke a change in your physiology? Is there any other way a dog might assist with specific symptoms?

You may want to talk with the people close to you about

how your disability affects your life, and how a dog might assist you. Write a list of the things you want your dog to do.

Your list may naturally lead you to your dog's ideal size. Large breeds are traditionally used by assistance dog associations, so they may be recognized by the public and produce fewer public access challenges.

Smaller dogs take up less room, are less expensive to feed, live longer, and can work just as well as their larger cousins.

Breeds which are short haired are easy to keep clean and groomed. Long coated dogs may shed, or have problems with the Australian heat especially in areas with a lot of paving like town centres. Some thick coated dogs need regular haircuts.

Grooming a dog may be therapeutic for some people. People with lethargy from a depressive disorder may be unable to brush a dog regularly. Some individuals with anxiety disorders like OCD may find the thought of dog hair around the house overwhelming.

It is important to get a dog you enjoy working with. Hounds and terriers, bred to chase game or rodents, are independently-minded. Dogs bred to retrieve game tend to enjoy working

for people. Dogs bred for guard work require confident handling. Toy breed dogs bred for companionship are focused on their humans.

Good Positive Only trainers have had experience with many breeds and can give you insight on how you would interact with dogs of different types. Additionally, other people who have trained their own assistance dogs can advise you on what breeds might work for you. mindDog has a private training forum on Facebook which you will be invited to join. There you can seek advice from other



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helping dogs helping people

mindDogs and our trainers.

Your activity level is important. All dogs need at least one good walk a day where they can sniff, trot around off leash and be a dog. Larger dogs often need more than one walk. Remember that your dog has needs you cannot ignore.

If one walk a day is all you can manage, low-energy dogs like Shih Tzus are your best bet. Medium energy dogs like Labradors and retrievers will need an hour or more of exercise a day. High energy breeds like a Boxer or Border Collie need to run for 1-2 hours a day, have a lot of play and generally keep busy.

If you have trouble leaving the house you need to include that when thinking about your ability to exercise your dog. It is always better to get a dog with less energy and over-exercise it than to get a dog with too much energy and under-exercise it. Pent-up energy is a leading cause of canine misbehaviour.

Many people enjoy participating in dog sports like agility, rally, flyball, and freestyle dancing, and may even include this in their treatment plan. These sports provide excellent physical and mental stimulation for both the dog and the handler, and require regular trips outside the home. Dogs of any breed and humans of any physical ability can participate.

Since the sport is focused on the dogs, not the people, if you have social anxiety it can be a chance to safely be around other people. Most obedience clubs have these sports as part of their activities.

If you plan to take your dog to work, you might not want a pug-nosed dog that snorts or snores. If it is inconvenient for you to carry a towel at all times, you won't want a dog that slobbers. If you travel on public transport and planes frequently, giant breeds may be impractical. Add all of these things to your list, and you will now have a good idea of what you need to look for in your assistance dog.

Where should I get my dog?

While we make no recommendations as to breed or type of dog, we do suggest getting a two to three year old dog from a shelter.

An adult dog's personality is quite stable. Most adult dogs will be done with their chewing phase, and should be house trained. They may even have some basic obedience training, and a retired show dog may already

be used to crowds and distracting environments.

A rescued dog is often eternally grateful for your intervention in his life and can form a very intense bond with you. Rescues can be the least expensive way to get a dog. Most come already neutered and with basic vet needs taken care of. However, their genetic and behavioural histories are usually unknown so you may be taking a risk with emotional baggage that might never be overcome.

Then again, many breed rescues have dogs that have been in their care for some time and will have a good idea of the dog's temperament.

Be aware that mindDog will only accept pups once they are six months old and desexed.

If you get a puppy, you will have the advantage of controlling almost every experience in your dog's life. There will be no hidden surprises, no added baggage in your dog's history of which you are unaware. However, you must have the emotional and physical energy for a puppy.

You will have to house train and socialize your pup intensely for the first few months of its life. You will have to deal with puppy energy, puppy chewing, and all the other mischief that puppies get into.

Not all breeders are as ethical as they should be. They seldom admit to any kind of shortcomings or problems with their dogs.



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A reputable breeder will provide a certificate guaranteeing that your dog is free from any genetic defect common to that breed.

They can provide you with a pedigree of your dog which can be important for the genetic and personality information it can provide. Many breeds have specific genetic problems as a result of breeding for appearance. One example is hip dysplasia in some larger breeds particularly German Shepherds.

Personality can be inherited, so if you know that one of the parents of a dog you are interested in is skittish or fearful, avoid those pups. However, if the pup's mother is calm, laid back and well mannered then it's likely that the pup will be too.

Pedigree dogs from breeders are usually more expensive and it may be difficult to find an adult dog from a breeder. Occasionally, a breeder may have a one or two year old dog that hasn't been placed with a new owner. Often this is because the dog may not be of show

standard but may make a great service dog.

Do not buy a puppy from a pet shop.

You will have no way of checking its temperament or breeding and the shop assistant just wants a sale. The pup may well come from a puppy mill where huge numbers of small cute puppies are bred often in appalling conditions.

Puppy mills are in it for the money, and to make as much money as possible, they over-breed their dogs and do not take them to the vet or do proper genetic testing. Puppy mills usually have a glut of puppies and will often breed for "rare" colours or sizes like "teacup" or "royal" dogs. They also often breed designer dogs—purposefully mixing two dogs and giving them names like puggles (pug x beagle), cockerpoo (cocker spaniel x poodle), or doxiwawa (daschund x chihuahua).

Never ever buy a dog on the internet. They are often shipped in cardboard boxes (YES) and will NOT come from someone concerned for the dog's welfare.

While we have no age limits on dogs, remember that an older dog may become ill or die sooner. Larger breeds tend to have shorter life spans than smaller breeds. If you are choosing an adult dog, around two years old is a good compromise.

In trying to make the decisions of puppy vs. adult, breeder vs. rescue, there are four facts that are supported by a number of scientific papers.

Fact 1: An adult dog's temperament is stable and relaxed if the dog is living in a stable and relaxed home.

Fact 2: Adult shelter dogs' temperament tests do not reliably predict if they will succeed in assistance work, probably due to the stress of the shelter situation.

Fact 3: One puppy temperament test at 8 weeks will not reliably predict temperament for assistance work, except for fear/confidence in new situations.

Fact 4: The best predictor for a puppy succeeding at assistance work is the temperament of their mother—in other words, if the mother has an assistance dog temperament, there is a good chance that a puppy will have those traits as an adult.

How do I pick my dog?

How you pick your dog will depend on where you get it from. If you get a puppy from a breeder, your choice will likely be more about which breeder than which individual puppy. If you start with an adult dog from a rescue group, then the dog's temperament will be important.

Most good breeders will match you with the appropriate puppy. If you prefer to start with an adult dog, try looking for a rescue dog, if it has been in a foster home long enough to relax and allow its true temperament to show through. You want an adult dog that has lived in a stable home environment for some period of time.

When looking for personality, you want to get a dog that can think independently when it needs to help you in a new situation. You want a dog that is friendly to other dogs, but not so friendly that they cannot focus on humans when there is another dog around. The dog should be OK with people of all shapes, sizes and colours. You want a dog that responds well to training, and that is motivated by food, praise, or a toy—but not so motivated that if they see a different toy or smell food that they lose all focus on you. A good general rule is that a middle-of-the-road, easy-going dog will do well in assistance work.

Whatever dog you choose, there will always be vet bills which must be paid. All mindDogs must be desexed. Their annual vaccinations must be up to date, and flea and tick prevention are vital in Australia

Do not settle for a dog that does not meet your criteria. Remember you could be spending the next 10+ years of your life with this animal, and waiting a few months for the right dog will be worth it.

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