

# PICK OF THE LITTER

## *How to find your new puppy*

You've spent hours pouring over dog books and magazines, surfing the Internet, and talking to dog owners. You've chosen a breed that's a good match for your home, lifestyle, personality and family. And now you're ready to find the cute, cuddly puppy you've been dreaming of.

Hold on! You want a healthy, good-natured, well-socialized puppy, one who'll bring you and your family many years of happy companionship!

A dog's health, temperament, and sociability are largely determined by genes and whether or not he and his mother receive good care. So choosing where to get your puppy is a very important decision.

There are a variety of sources for puppies. Before you pick one, you need to know the differences between them.

### **Pet Shops**

Many of us grew up singing, "How much is that doggie in the window?" So it may surprise you to learn that a pet shop isn't the best place to buy a puppy. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) and the American Humane Society estimate that 90% of pet shop puppies come from puppy mills. The rest come from irresponsible breeders, people who haven't been able to sell them, or those who raise puppies only for profit.

Pet shop puppies are bred carelessly, in volume. The pet shop may be clean, but to increase profits, the puppies' breeders cut corners in caring for their dogs. Pups often receive no medical care before arriving at the store. Their parents are not tested for genetic diseases. Sales clerks know nothing about the health or temperament of the puppies' ancestors, or whether their parents suffer from hereditary maladies such as hip dysplasia, heart or eye disease, or epilepsy. Most pet shop puppies suffer the trauma of being taken from their mothers and littermates at too young an age and shipped across country. Most have not been adequately socialized during their early weeks. For these reasons, pet shop puppies often develop health and/or temperament problems.



### **Backyard Breeders**

Owners who occasionally breed their pets are called "backyard breeders." They may love Keesha and want to have puppies before they spay her. Or they may be breeding for profit.

Backyard breeders sometimes have good intentions, but they breed randomly, with no knowledge of canine genetics. They probably haven't had the dam and sire tested for genetic diseases, and don't know whether the puppies' ancestors were healthy or of sound temperament. Often, they don't know how to care for or socialize the puppies. For these reasons, backyard breeders' puppies often develop health and temperament problems.

It's rare for a backyard breeder to offer any kind of health guarantee, or give any support if you have questions later. Most will not take a dog back if it develops a genetic problem or if the owner can no longer keep it.

### **Commercial Breeders**

The commercial breeder's only reason for breeding is to make money – puppies are their cash crop. They breed for quantity, not quality, producing large numbers of puppies, often of multiple breeds. Most of these puppies are sold to pet shops, but some commercial breeders sell directly to the public.

Some commercial kennels are clean, but many of them are the infamous puppy mills, whose dogs live in filthy, inhumane conditions. The puppies' mothers are bred at every heat cycle – they live only four or five years before they're worn out and the puppy mills dispose of them.

Commercial breeders rarely screen their dogs for genetic or temperament problems. They produce

so many puppies that they're unlikely to give them adequate care. The puppies receive little or no individual attention or handling, and are usually separated from their mothers and littermates at too young an age. Lack of socialization with people and other dogs during this critical time of their lives frequently leads to temperament problems like aggression and timidity, and makes these puppies hard to train.

Commercial breeders will probably not be available if you have questions or need advice after you buy your puppy. Most will not take a dog back if it develops a problem due to poor breeding.

## Hobby Breeders

Good hobby breeders are the best source for healthy, well-socialized puppies. These breeders love their breed, and care very much about their puppies. They consider their puppies "family," not just a product they produce to make money. (In fact, they often lose money on their litters – dogs are their love, not their business.)

Being a responsible, ethical breeder is a huge job! Because they love the breed and their puppies, good hobby breeders put an enormous amount of time and effort into each litter.

They choose the puppies' parents very carefully. They make sure both parents are healthy (including x-rays and other tests to screen for genetic diseases.) They study the parents' pedigrees and learn about their ancestors to screen for any hidden problems. They breed only dogs who have excellent temperaments. They show their dogs to get objective evaluations by expert judges that the dogs are good examples of their breed.

They provide the mothers and puppies with high-quality, extra-nutritious food, and the best, most comprehensive veterinary care. They also spend many, many hours monitoring the puppies' health, evaluating them, giving them love and attention, and socializing them with people and other dogs.

Their puppies arrive in your home loving people, accustomed to being handled, used to the noises and activity of a household, and ready to be excellent pets.

Good hobby breeders are there to help puppy buyers with advice, support and information for the dog's entire life. They'll show you how to groom your dog, encourage and advise you regarding behavior issues, hold your hand if the dog becomes ill, and cheer for your dog's accomplishments.

These breeders stand behind their dogs. They'll take them back at any age, for any reason, to make sure they don't end up in a shelter or other bad situation. They **never** sell their puppies through pet shops, where they would be sold to anyone who plunks down a credit card.

## HOW TO FIND A GOOD BREEDER

Now that you know a good hobby breeder is the best source for a puppy, how do you find one?

One of the best places to look is at a dog show. Here you can watch the dogs and meet breeders and other serious hobbyists. Find out when your breed will be showing and watch the competition. You'll see puppies and adults of both sexes. Watch how they interact with their handlers. Are they playful and confident? Eager to please? After the show, speak to the handlers of the dogs you like. (Before they show, they'll be getting their dogs ready for the ring and may not have time to talk.) Good breeders will be friendly and willing to answer questions.

Contact the breed club in your area. They'll be able to give you a list of breeders who are members of the club. For a list of local and national breed clubs, contact the AKC at 5580 Centerview Dr., Raleigh, NC 27606; <http://www.akc.org>; (919) 233-9767.

Contact breed rescue groups in your area. Rescue groups rarely have puppies available, but they will know who the reputable breeders are and will be happy to refer you to them.

## Questions to Ask

Now you're ready to interview breeders. Here are some questions that will help you evaluate them and make sure they're reputable.

**How many dogs do you own and what breeds are they?** Good breeders give plenty of attention to each dog; they don't own more dogs than they can give time to. They limit themselves to no more than one or two breeds, so they can be thoroughly knowledgeable about each one.

**Are your dogs AKC registered?** AKC registration does not guarantee that the breeder is reputable. However, **lack** of AKC registration is a sign that the breeder is **not** reputable. There are a number of bogus registries that are used by puppymillers who are unable to register their dogs with AKC. Don't buy a puppy without AKC registration!

**Do you belong to the local or national breed clubs?** Membership in a breed club is an indication of commitment to the breed.

**Do you show your dogs in conformation or performance events?** Breeders who show their dogs in conformation, obedience, agility, etc., are probably working to improve the appearance, health, and athletic abilities of their breed. They're not likely to be breeding only for profit.

**How many litters (as owner and co-owner) do you breed per year?** Reputable breeders put so much time and effort into their puppies, they usually breed no more than one or two litters per year. Often, they have a waiting list and don't breed unless they have several homes waiting for puppies. Beware of breeders who produce more than 3-4 litters per year. They are breeding their females too often or they have so many dogs that they can't care for them properly, and they can't provide good follow-up on their puppies.

**How often do you breed your females?** To protect their health, females should have no more than two litters in any 18-month period.

**Do you have a goal for your breeding program? For which traits do you breed?** Good breeders seek to improve their breed. They try to produce puppies that are better than their parents. Beware of breeders who are breeding for unusual qualities, such as non-standard colors or extra large or small size. Also beware of someone who says they're only breeding pets to sell – their goal is money, not quality.

**What genetic problems occur in this breed, and what testing do you do?** A reputable breeder is knowledgeable about the genetic problems in his breed, and will be candid with you about them. He tests the puppies' parents for hereditary defects such as hip, knee and eye problems, and other diseases that may occur in the breed. The dam and sire should be certified free of hip dysplasia by an orthopedic specialist or national registry, such as OFA or Penn-Hip. Their eyes should be certified normal by CERF or a veterinary ophthalmologist. Other tests should be performed as appropriate for the breed. **Ask for copies of the certificates!** Verify OFA results at <http://www.offa.org> and CERF at <http://www.vmdb.org/cerf.html>

**Do you offer a health guarantee?** A reputable breeder guarantees his puppies in writing for a **minimum of two years**. Many guarantee their puppies for longer. During this time, if the puppy

develops a genetic defect (such as hip dysplasia or epilepsy), a reputable breeder will give you another puppy or refund your **full** purchase price. **The guarantee should apply to all puppies (pet or show), and against all genetic defects, not just a specified few.**

**What drawbacks/special needs does this breed have?** Do they tend to be barky? Do they shed a lot? Do they need lots of attention? Grooming? A job to do? **Every** breed has drawbacks and special needs. A good breeder will be honest with you about them and help you decide whether this is a good breed for you.

**May I see your contract?** Never buy a puppy without a contract! It should include the health guarantee and a statement that the breeder will take the dog back if you can't keep him. It should also require pet puppies to be spayed or neutered. This is for the health and welfare of the dog, and to prevent unwanted litters. Beware of co-ownerships unless you know the breeder well and are certain you'll get along – these can be very unpleasant if you disagree on something later. Also beware of "puppy back" contracts that require you to breed your dog – some authors have called this a "puppy pyramid scheme!"

**May I see the puppies' pedigree?** A pedigree is a family tree, listing the puppies' ancestors. Of course, all dogs have ancestors. Having a pedigree isn't the important thing – it's what's in the pedigree that matters. A reputable breeder will have a pedigree ready to show you. She can describe the dogs in it and explain their titles. Titles are important because they're evidence of sound bodies, good temperaments, intelligence and trainability. Beware of the phrase "championship lines" – it's used by backyard breeders and puppy millers who've managed to get their hands on a dog with champions in his pedigree.

**How old are your puppies when you send them to their new homes?** Caring, responsible breeders never take puppies from their mothers and littermates before 8 weeks old. Puppies separated earlier miss out on critical socialization with other dogs, which can cause serious behavior problems throughout their lives.

**May I see your puppies' health records?** Health records should include an exam by a veterinarian, fecal check and/or deworming, and initial immunizations. Don't buy a puppy who hasn't been examined by a vet.

**A responsible, reputable breeder asks YOU questions, too!** Good breeders love their puppies and want to make sure they get good homes. Expect a breeder to ask you questions, too! Their questions help them find good homes for their dogs, and by getting to know you, they'll be able to help you choose the puppy who's best for you. If a breeder doesn't ask questions, this is a very bad sign! A breeder who doesn't care enough to ask questions doesn't care enough to make sure his puppies are healthy, have good temperaments and are well-socialized. His puppies are likely to develop health and/or temperament problems, and he won't be there for you if this happens.

Buy only from a breeder who cares enough to ask you questions!

**If I have questions later, may I call you?** Good breeders welcome you to call them if you have questions or need advice or support. They'll be there for you for the dog's entire lifetime.

**Do you keep track of puppy buyers, and may I contact them?** Reputable breeders stay in touch with their puppies' families and will be happy for you to talk with former puppy buyers. Get some names and call them for a reference!

Does the breeder seem knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the breed? Would you like to have a long-term relationship with her?

## Visiting the Breeder

It's important to visit the breeder to see the way the puppies are raised and to meet their mother and other relatives.

Beware of a breeder who does not want you to see her entire facility. If she won't let you see where her dogs actually live, she's probably hiding something. Never buy a puppy from a breeder who wants to meet you at a gas station or rest stop!

The premises should be clean and the dogs should look clean, healthy and well-kept. Are they happy? Watch for a loving relationship between the breeder and her dogs. Are the dogs pets, members of her family, or just kennel dogs? This is an indication of how much she cares about them.

Bric-a-brac, such as statues and pictures of the breed are a good sign – they demonstrate sincere devotion to the breed.

Pay special attention to the puppies' mother. She won't look gorgeous after giving birth and nursing puppies, but a good breeder will proudly show you a photograph of her at her best. Be sure you like her temperament! The mother's temperament rubs off on her puppies, so what you see is probably what you'll get. Is she sweet and good-natured? Don't buy her puppy if she growls aggressively, is timid, or shows other signs of a poor temperament. She should be friendly enough for you to pet her. Don't fall for the line that she's "just protecting her puppies."

Good breeders often don't own the puppies' sire. He frequently lives far away. A good breeder will show you his photograph. She'll tell you about him and why she chose him as the puppies' father.

Watch the puppies interacting with one another, with the other dogs, and with the breeder. They should be friendly and playful, bright-eyed and roly-poly. Their coats should be shiny and supple. Do they have a clean pen and plenty of toys to play with? They should respond eagerly to attention and enjoy being petted. Avoid a puppy who's shy, withdrawn or fearful. Do they love their breeder? This is a very good sign!

**Your puppy will be a member of your family for many years. You'll invest a lot of love in your new puppy. Take the time to buy a healthy, well-socialized puppy from a responsible, reputable, caring breeder. You'll be glad you did!**



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