

Your complete guide to natural dog care and training

Whole Dog Journal™



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Don't Fight, Switch!

Why you should be searching for several good foods for your dog, not just one.

It's not even close. When people learn what I do for a living, or when they know what I do and have an opportunity to "ask me anything," they nearly always ask, "What kind of dog food is the best?"

I always respond the same way. "There is no single 'best' dog food! You should find out which foods suit the dogs you are feeding; they all have different needs, just as we do."

Rarely do people want to hear this. So they try trickery. "Just tell me this, then: Which food do you feed *your* dogs?" they ask.

Ah, but they missed a very important plural "S" in my previous answer. So now I get to redirect them, to send them in a direction that will help them understand my previous answer. I tell them that I almost never feed my dogs the same food from bag to bag or can to can. I switch foods constantly, rotating among brands, varieties within brands, and forms of food (wet, dry, frozen, dehydrated, home-prepared). All the foods I feed are good ones, I tell my friends and acquaintances; I would *never* feed just one!

That tends to shock people; it seems that most people feed one brand and variety of food to their dogs day in and day out – *year* in and *year* out! I just don't understand why so few people question this practice, especially when they would never consider feeding themselves or their children the exact same diet every day for years on end.

I'm certain the practice originally got promoted by one of the pet-food companies. They likely observed that dogs who had been maintained on the same diet for months at a time – such as company-owned dogs inducted into long-term feeding trials that are used to develop and test new foods – often experienced transient diarrhea or upset stomachs when suddenly switched to a new diet. Some smart market researcher said, "Eureka! We can use this to build brand loyalty! Let's tell dog owners that switching foods causes digestive problems!" And it was likely an easy sell, because, in fact, people seem to have an innate tendency toward brand loyalty; most of us tend to buy the same type of dish soap or laundry detergent or breakfast cereal every time.

The fact that eludes many dog owners, however, is that humans, too, will experience an upset stomach if they eat the same thing for every meal for months, and then are suddenly fed something new. But if they – dogs *or* humans – eat a varied diet *all the time*, very few have a problem switching. And because the nutrient levels in every commercial food are different, and no one knows what levels are ideal, it's smart to rotate among a few good foods to achieve balance over time. And I'm more than happy to tell you how to select *several* good foods for your dog. See "Canned Answers," on the facing page, for buying advice.

NK





Canned Answers

As with all of our dog-food reviews, we're giving you the information you need to select the best food for your dog. This time, we'll disclose our favorites, too.

Whole Dog Journal is in its 20th year of publication. Coincidentally, the age of modern pet food is also about two decades old. Before that, dog foods were made almost exclusively with byproducts of human food manufacturing – ingredients that would be wasted if not for their inclusion in pet food or animal feed.

Around that time, however, a few small companies introduced some exciting new dog foods. Historically, canned dog foods were a handy place to utilize parts of food-animal carcasses that couldn't be used in human food products, ingredients with the anonymous designation of “meat” or the even more dubious “meat byproducts.” But these new pet foods contained *named* meats, like chicken and beef. Exciting! In our inaugural review of “top quality dog foods” in 1998, we found precisely *five* companies that were marketing outstanding new products like this.

The next year, there were a few more, and the year after that, more still.

Eventually, the trickle turned into a *flood*. While there are still many pet foods made with byproducts, the “natural/holistic” or “super premium” category (as the industry alternately refers to this niche) has grown faster than any other segment of the pet-food market.

In the past two decades, *dozens* of pet food companies have been launched and expanded. Some of the most successful upstarts have been purchased by bigger pet food companies or backed by private equity firms that could support their expansion.

The growth of this category hasn't been lost on the global pet food giants. Though the world's biggest pet food companies traditionally make competitively priced foods that are sold in mass quantities in mass markets (such as grocery chains and big-box stores), today, most have been drawn into the natural/holistic/ultra-premium game – to some extent, anyway. All of the biggest pet food makers in the world now offer one or two lines of products that have been slightly upgraded from the usual big-box fare. In most cases, though, the giant food manufacturers' commitment to this niche runs out at about the third or fourth ingredient on the label; then it's business as usual.

HOW DO YOU CHOOSE?

It's great for our dogs that there are so many good foods on the market today. But the wide range of options makes the task of selecting foods a bit more challenging. It may be a *nice* problem to have, but for owners who don't know where to start, it *is* a problem!

Pet supply stores generally carry a wide assortment of products, which may range very widely in quality. The ingredients lists and prices will help you identify the higher-quality foods, but make sure you check the minimum amounts of protein and fat in the guaranteed analysis, as well as the “life stage” the food is formulated for (all life stages, or adult maintenance only?).



Since WDJ’s inception, we’ve described how we recommend selecting pet foods; we share our selection criteria in every food review (including this one, see “Canned Dog Food Selection Criteria,” right). This explains the absolute basics of “what to look for and what to *look out* for.” Armed with this information, you can identify the better-quality foods in *any* group of products.

But there are also a number of factors that you should look at with an eye toward feeding *your* dog or dogs – and you should be open to the idea that each of your dogs might do best on different foods. It seems crazy to even have to say it, but all dogs are individuals, just like us. Some can eat the canine equivalent of a pint of Ben & Jerry’s every night and stay slim; others need their fat intake strictly limited, lest they develop an attack of pancreatitis.

When buying a food with a *specific* dog in mind, consider the following:

■ **The ingredients.** Is your dog allergic to or intolerant of any of the ingredients in the food?

■ **Fat.** The amount of fat in each variety offered by a given manufacturer can vary a *lot*. To know where to start, check the amount of fat in the food you are feeding now. If your dog is on the, um, fluffy side, look for a variety that contains a lower amount of fat.

Note: If you’ve bought a food with a smaller amount of “minimum crude fat” on the label and your dog is still not losing any weight, contact the

manufacturer and ask for the *exact* amount of fat in the food. The numbers that are listed in the “guaranteed analysis” are *minimum* amounts, and a food (especially a canned food) might contain a good bit more than the minimum amount guaranteed.

■ **Protein.** The amount of protein in canned foods can also vary quite a bit; given that most good-quality canned foods don’t contain much (if any) carbohydrates, the protein content will often be inversely related to the moisture content. (“Stews” may contain as much as 82 percent moisture and have lower minimum levels of protein than loaf-type foods, which generally have about 78 percent moisture, max.)

Is your dog an athlete, or a senior who is rapidly losing muscle mass? A higher-protein food could be beneficial. If he’s a couch potato, though, a lower-protein food may well be sufficient. Discuss this with your vet – and carefully observe your dog’s physique after making changes to his diet.

■ **Nutritional adequacy statement.** Foods that are “complete and balanced” must be labeled with a statement that spells out what specific standards they have met. First, make sure that the food does have a statement using the words “complete and balanced.” While all of the products listed on our “Approved Foods” lists are complete and balanced, some of the manufacturers of these products *also* make products that are labeled as being for “intermittent or supplemental feeding only.” These products are *not* complete and balanced.

We’ve noticed that some of the food manufacturers are marketing foods for small dogs in small packets and tubs that are very similar to the packages for their nutritionally incomplete “mixer” or “topper” products. Look for that statement! (And if you are over 40, bring your glasses or magnifying glass! The type on many of these small packages is barely readable!)

Further, the statement should reference the “life stage” of the dog that the food is formulated to nourish. Many foods are labeled as being complete and balanced for “adult maintenance.” These products do not contain adequate nutrition for growing puppies or pregnant or lactating mothers; their nutritional needs are greater. A claim that says the food is formulated to meet the needs of dogs in “all life stages” will do just that; “all life stages” includes puppies and their moms.

“APPROVED FOODS” LIST

On pages 6-7, you’ll find this year’s “approved foods” list. The list is organized alphabetically by the best-known product line associated with the company. For example, Nature’s Variety has nearly given up on its original name; today, it has separate websites and branding for its Instinct and Prairie products, so those are listed under the product names, not the company name.

If you visit the company websites to look for more information about their products (and we hope you do!), don’t be dismayed if you see a different number of products than we’ve listed. The numbers of varieties and formulas often shift, as manufacturers retire certain formulas and bring out new products. We could take this opportunity to rant and rave about companies with *too many* offerings (cough, cough Merrick; cough, cough, Wellpet), but we won’t.

Keep in mind, too, that we have only counted each company’s “complete and balanced” diets and products that meet our selection criteria. (For example, Koha makes eight canned foods, but four contain porcine plasma, a protein booster that we don’t like to see in foods, so we don’t count those varieties. Read the ingredients!)

Finally, you may be looking for some products that have appeared on our “approved foods” lists in the past, but don’t appear this year. See “Not Recommended” on the next page to learn why we have taken some products off our “approved foods” list.



Canned Dog Food Selection Criteria

HALLMARKS OF QUALITY –

In order to appear on our “approved foods” list, a canned dog food **must have the following:**

- A whole, named animal protein in one of the first two positions on the ingredients list. “Whole” means no byproducts. “Named” means a specific animal species – chicken, beef, pork, lamb – as opposed to “meat” or “poultry.” Look for products with the highest possible inclusion of top-quality animal proteins; in other words, choose a product with the animal product listed first over a product that listed water (or broth) first and the animal product second.
- If a fat source is present, it must be named (“chicken fat” rather than “animal fat”).
- If vegetables, grains, or other carb sources are used, we prefer to see them whole, rather than byproducts (for example, potatoes rather than potato starch).

DISQUALIFIERS – We will not approve a canned dog food that contains:

- An unnamed animal protein or fat source, such as “meat,” “poultry,” or “animal fat.”
- Any meat byproducts or poultry byproducts.
- Any animal plasma product.
- Wheat gluten, which may be used as a cheap source of plant protein, a thickener, and/or a binder, holding together artificially formed “chunks” of ground meat.
- Sugar, molasses, or other sweeteners.
- Artificial colors, flavors, or preservatives.

Appealing to Human Appetites

If you’ve been in a pet supply store lately, you may have noticed that the canned dog food, in particular, looks absolutely delicious!

Some industry observers refer to this trend as “humanization,” by which we think they mean “to endow with human characteristics.” That phrase has irritated us since we first heard it, because, originally, it was always used in a subtly derogatory way. Pet food industry magazines used the phrase almost exclusively to trivialize the use of ingredients that, historically, have been considered “too good for dogs.” This bugged us because, darn it, there *are* very legitimate reasons to utilize high-quality ingredients in pet food, and a person who wants to feed a top-quality, healthy food to their dog shouldn’t be sneered at.

So, while the industry pundits wink when they discuss “humanized” products, they don’t differentiate between those that are made with high-quality “human grade” ingredients that have a proven track record of successfully nourishing dogs and those that are formulated and packaged specifically to appeal to human tastes. In our view, the former is a nutritional strategy that makes sense; the latter is marketing. The best way to tell the difference, as always, is to study the ingredients – though it’s a pretty good tip that marketing alone is at play when you see product labels with photos that look like food on your mother’s table, or the name of the product contains words such as *fricasee* or *filet mignon*.



Not Recommended

There are two companies that we just couldn’t include on our “approved foods” list this year, even though, by virtue of a simple label review, they have a ton of products that meet our selection criteria. But both companies have, in our opinion and the eyes of many, lost credibility due to recurring mishaps of one kind or another.

Evanger’s Dog & Cat Food Company is one of them. On December 31, 2016, several dogs belonging to one family got sick after eating an Evanger’s beef-based dog food; one, a senior dog, died despite immediate veterinary treatment. An investigation revealed that the “beef” in the Evanger’s food was, in fact, *horse meat* that was contaminated with pentobarbital. Other cans of that product and other products made by Evanger’s containing “beef” from the same supplier were also tested and were also found to contain pentobarbital. Evanger’s has blamed its meat supplier, and lawsuits and counter-suits are flying. But we just can’t overlook this sort of quality-control failure.

We’re also taking a pass on recommending Blue Buffalo’s foods. Too many recalls, the false advertising class action lawsuit . . . and the company was one of the very few that flat-out said they would not supply us with nutrient analyses for their products (which would verify that the products are, in fact, complete and balanced). We just don’t get a good feeling from Blue.

WHOLE DOG JOURNAL'S APPROVED CANNED DOG FOODS FOR 2017

PRODUCT NAME Company Information	Number of Varieties	Range of Protein Content Range of Fat Content
ADDITION Kent, WA (425) 251-0330 addictionfoods.com	8 grain-free varieties	Min. 8% - 9% protein Min. 2% - 6% fat
AVODERM Breeder's Choice, a div. of Central Garden & Pet Walnut Creek, CA (866) 500-6286 avodernatural.com	13 varieties, 4 grain-free	Min. 7% - 8% protein Min. 4% - 7% fat
AZMIRA Tucson, AZ (800) 497-5665 azmira.com	3 varieties	Min. 10% protein Min. 5% fat
BLACKWOOD Blackwood Pet Food Lisbon, OH (888) 843-1738 blackwoodpetfood.com	4 grain-free varieties	Min. 9.5% protein Min. 8.5% - 9% fat
BRAVO Bravo Pet Foods Manchester, CT (866) 922-9222 bravopetfoods.com	6 grain-free varieties	Min. 9.5% - 11.5% protein Min. 4.5% - 9% fat
BYNATURE Kent Pet Group Muscatine, IA (877) 367-9225 bynaturepetfoods.com	14 grain-free varieties	Min. 8% - 10% protein Min. 4.5% - 8% fat
CANIDAE Canidae Corp. San Luis Obispo, CA (800) 398-1600 canidae.com	2 lines containing 11 varieties, 5 grain-free	Min. 6% - 10% protein Min. 4.5% - 8% fat
CASTOR & POLLUX ORGANIX ULTRAMIX Merrick Pet Foods Hereford, TX (800) 875-7518 castorpolluxpet.com	2 lines, containing 27 varieties, 19 grain-free	Min. 7% - 9% protein Min. 3% - 6.5% fat
CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE SOUL Cos Cob, CT (800) 658-0624 chickensouppets.com	7 varieties, 4 grain-free	Min. 7.5 - 9% fat
CLOUDSTAR St. Louis, MO (800) 361-9079 cloudstar.com	5 grain-free varieties	Min. 7% protein Min. 3% - 4% fat
DOGSWELL Los Angeles, CA (888) 559-8833 dogswell.com	4 lines containing 16 grain-free varieties	Min. 8% - 10% protein Min. 4% - 10% fat

PRODUCT NAME Company Information	Number of Varieties	Range of Protein Content Range of Fat Content
EAGLE PACK Wellpet Tewksbury, MA (800) 225-0904 eaglepack.com	4 varieties	Min. 9% protein Min. 6% fat
EVO Natura Pet, a div. of Mars Petcare Santa Clara, CA (800) 532-7261 evopet.com	2 grain-free varieties	Min. 8.5% - 9% protein Min. 4.8% - 6% fat
FIRSTMATE North Vancouver, Canada (800) 658-1166 firstmate.com	2 lines, containing 7 grain-free varieties	Min. 10% - 12% protein Min. 5% fat
FROMM Fromm Family Pet Food Mequon, WI (800) 325-6331 frommfamily.com	3 lines, containing 15 grain-free varieties	Min. 7% - 10% protein Min. 2% - 6.5% fat
GO! Petcurean Abbotsford, Canada (866) 864-6112 petcurean.com	6 varieties, 3 grain-free	Min. 8% - 10% protein Min. 4% - 6% fat
HOUND & GATOS New York, NY (212) 618-1917 houndgatos.com	12 grain-free varieties	Min. 10% - 11% protein Min. 6.5% - 10% fat
LOTUS Lotus Natural Food Torrance, CA (888) 995-6887 lotuspetfoods.com	2 lines, containing 5 grain-free varieties	Min. 10% - 15% protein Min. 4% - 5% fat
HALO Halo, Purely for Pets Tampa, FL (800) 426-4256 halopets.com	14 varieties, 6 grain-free	Min. 5.7% - 11% protein Min. 3.5% - 10% fat
HEALTH EXTENSION Melville, NY (800) 992-9738 healthextension.com	10 varieties, 4 grain-free	Min. 7% - 8% protein Min. 2% - 6% fat
HOLISTIC SELECT Wellpet Tewksbury, MA (800) 225-0904 holisticselect.com	6 grain-free varieties	Min. 11% - 12% protein Min. 6% - 8% fat
INSTINCT Nature's Variety St. Louis, MO (888) 519-7387 instinctpetfood.com	Instinct: 21 grain-free varieties	Min. 8% - 11% protein Min. 3% - 8% fat

PRODUCT NAME Company Information	Number of Varieties	Range of Protein Content Range of Fat Content
KOHA Delray Beach, FL (800) 478-7713 kohapet.com	4 grain-free varieties	Min. 9.7% - 10.5% protein Min. 7.5% - 8% fat
MERRICK Amarillo, TX (800) 664-7387 merrickpetcare.com	7 lines containing 57 grain-free varieties	Min. 7% - 10.3% protein Min. 3% - 7% fat
NATURAL BALANCE Natural Balance, a div. of J.M. Smuckers Burbank, CA (800) 829-4493 naturalbalanceinc.com	5 lines containing 32 varieties, 17 grain-free	Min. 5% - 11% protein Min. 2% - 8% fat
NEWMAN'S OWN Westport, CT (203) 222-0136 newmansown.com	2 lines, containing 11 varieties, 7 organic & grain-free	Min. 8% - 12% protein Min. 2.5% - 7.5% fat
NULO Austin, TX (512-) 476-6856 nulo.com	10 varieties	Min. 10% protein Min. 5% - 9% fat
OSOPURE Artemis Carson, CA (310) 513-4090 artemiscompany.com	9 grain-free varieties	Min. 8% protein Min. 4% - 6% fat
PARTY ANIMAL West Hollywood, CA (855) 727-8926 partyanimalpetfood.com	2 lines, containing 24 grain-free varieties, 10 organic	Min. 9% protein Min. 7% fat
PET-TAO Fairview, TN (615) 934-3832 pettao.com	4 grain-free varieties	Min. 8% - 10% protein Min. 6% - 8% fat
PINNACLE Central Garden & Pet Walnut Creek, CA (866) 500-6286 pinnaclepet.com	5 grain-free varieties	Min. 7% - 8.5% protein Min. 5% - 6.5% fat
PETGUARD Green Cove Springs, FL (800)874-3221 petguard.com	13 varieties, 1 grain-free	Min. 8% - 10% protein Min. 4.5% - 7.5% fat
PRAIRIE Nature's Variety St. Louis, MO (888) 519-7387 naturesvariety.com	7 varieties	Min. 7.5% - 8% protein Min. 4% - 5% fat
PRECISE Precise Pet Products St. Helena, CA (888) 477-3247 precisepet.com	3 varieties	Min. 7% - 8% protein Min. 5% - 6% fat

PRODUCT NAME Company Information	Number of Varieties	Range of Protein Content Range of Fat Content
REDBARN Redbarn Pet Products Long Beach, CA (800) 775-3849 redbarninc.com	15 grain-free varieties	Min. 8% - 11% protein Min. 3.5% - 9% fat
SOLID GOLD Greenville, SC (800) 364-4863 solidgoldpet.com	15 grain-free varieties	Min. 7.5% - 9.5% protein Min. 3% - 9% fat
TASTE OF THE WILD Diamond Pet Products Meta, MO (800) 442-0402 tasteofthewild petfood.com	5 grain-free varieties	Min. 7% - 8.5% protein Min. 3% - 4.5% fat
THREE DOG BAKERY Kansas City, MO (800) 487-3287 threedog.com	2 varieties	Min. 8% protein Min. 5% fat
TIKI DOG Tiki Pets Chesterfield, MO (866) 821-8562 tikipets.com	2 lines, containing 18 varieties, 8 grain-free	Min. 6.5% - 15.2% protein Min. 2.9% - 6.5% fat
ULTRAHOLISTIC Nutro (a div. of Mars) Franklin, TN (800) 833-5330 ultraholistic.com	7 varieties	Min. 7% - 10% protein Min. 2.5% - 6.5% fat
VERUS Abingdon, MD (888) 828-3787 veruspetfoods.com	11 varieties, 4 grain-free	Min. 6.5% - 8% protein Min. 4.5% - 6.5% fat
WHOLE EARTH FARMS Merrick Pet Care Amarillo, TX (800) 323-3353 feedgoodness.com	15 grain-free varieties	Min. 8% - 10% protein Min. 3% - 6.5% fat
WELLNESS Wellpet Tewksbury, MA (800) 225-0904 wellpet.com	6 lines, containing 48 varieties, 41 grain-free	Min. 6% - 12% protein Min. 2% - 8% fat
WERUVA Natick, MA (800) 776-5262 weruva.com	20 grain-free varieties	Min. 8.5% - 11.5% protein Min. 1.8% - 8.5% fat
WILD CALLING Greeley, CO (855) 628-7387 wildcalling.com	9 grain-free varieties	Min. 8% - 10% protein Min. 5.5% - 8% fat

Playing Favorites: Dog Food Companies We Love

We're often asked, "Come on; what's your favorite food?"

Foods have to be selected for each dog individually. We just can't answer that question.

However, we do have some favorite dog food companies.

Interestingly, Wellpet is on our list of favorites, which is weird, because a casual observer could say that the company has some of the same negatives that led to our distrust of Blue Buffalo. First, they use a number of contract manufacturers to make their canned dog foods, making it more difficult to provide reliable oversight of the manufacturing and perhaps contributing to some of the recalls they've had (like Blue Buffalo, the most recent was due to high thyroid levels in a beef-based food). And, like Blue Buffalo, their product line is way too big in our opinion; do all of those foods really offer anything unique? Can they really provide good oversight of so many SKU's?



But here's the difference between the two companies. When asked, Wellpet sent us complete nutrient analyses on all of its products, overnight. When asked, Wellpet has arranged for us to tour its own production facilities (in Mishawaka, Indiana) – and even strong-armed one of its contract manufacturing canneries into giving us a tour (our first time in a dog food cannery, in fact). And when something has gone wrong with one of its canine products, Wellpet has proactively contacted us, both to give us a heads-up and to explain what has been put in place to make sure whatever went wrong won't go wrong again. The company is extraordinarily transparent about its manufacturing locations, quality control and food safety protocols (and audits), and ingredient sourcing.

And, try this: Call the company any time during business hours. Your call will be answered by a live human being who can answer almost any question about the Wellpet foods; if she can't, she will research the issue and quickly get back to you. Amazing.

Unless you actually call these companies and ask them questions about their foods – a practice I can't recommend strongly enough – it may not be apparent that some of them are full-time, professional pet food manufacturing companies, and some are a guy with a business card, an answering service, and a contract with an independent co-packer. Now, this isn't a knock on every part-time pet food company owner out there. Some of those guys (this is the non-sexist form of the word; gals are inclusive) have innovated some very cool, healthy dog foods, personally locate sustainably and humanely raised animal ingredients, and oversee each run of their products at the contract manufacturing facility. But . . . some don't do any of those things.

Lotus is another company we love. They make only a few foods, but with ingredients they source close to the cannery they built and operate themselves. They invited us to come and watch them make canned food and allowed us to take as many photos as we liked, of anything we saw. We love transparency!



We're building a new appreciation for Halo, a company that for years has been anything but transparent regarding its manufacturing location. It is one of the few companies who told us to take a hike when we said we couldn't put its products (which we like!) on our "approved foods" lists unless it disclosed its manufacturing locations. But the company has a new CEO, who recently asked for

a meeting with us to introduce a company relaunch. All of Halo's products have been reformulated, and all of its animal ingredients are now sourced by the company from audited suppliers of humanely raised, free-range animals and sustainably caught fish. And we've been invited to tour its production facilities. Now we're talking. 🐾

Nancy Kerns is the editor of WDJ.



From Rescued to Rescuers

The National Disaster Search Dog Foundation trains handlers and dogs, places dogs on teams nationwide, and invites teams from all over the country to train at its state-of-the-art facility.

In January 2010, a massive earthquake rocked the West Indian island of Hispaniola, bringing the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince to its knees as hundreds of thousands of people were missing or feared dead amid the destruction.

As myriad relief teams sprung into action, some of the most highly skilled members hadn't yet reached a double-digit birthday, worked with enthusiastic barks and tail-wagging, and were happiest with "paychecks" they could tug.

They were urban search and rescue dogs, many of whom were trained at the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation in Santa Paula, California.



Photo courtesy of the NDSDF

ONE WOMAN'S VISION

The National Disaster Search Dog Foundation is the brainchild of Wilma Melville. It started when her retirement hobby as a civilian canine search-and-rescue handler took her to Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in the wake of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building bombing in 1995. At the time, Melville and her canine partner were one of only 15 canine teams certified by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the entire country. As she debriefed from the experience, she decided there had

to be a better way to develop qualified teams capable of meeting FEMA standards, and one short year later, the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation (NDSDF) was born.

Today, the foundation trains about 20 dogs per year, placing the canine graduates with approved first-responder handlers all around the country. Canine candidates are recruited almost exclusively from dogs living in shelters and with rescue groups. A network of trained canine recruiters research and evaluate prospects from across the country. Approximately 30 to 40 dogs find their way each year to the foundation, where they are further evaluated for acceptance into formal training. Dogs not accepted for formal training, or who are released from training at any point, are either placed with qualified families as part of the organization's Lifetime Care Program, or helped into a different working dog career.

Search dog Delta works a 10,000 square foot rubble pile at the National Training Center of the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation.



Photo courtesy of the NDSDF

Wilma Melville, founder of the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation, with search dog Allie.

"It's important to us to use rehomed dogs; it's

NDSDF trainer Kate Horwick directs search dog Delta on obstacles in an agility arena at the NTC. Dogs practice their balance, footwork, and directional control as they maneuver across elevated ladders, gently swinging tubes and other challenges.



Photo courtesy of the NDSDF

simply the right thing to do,” says Sylvia Stoney, NDSDF’s manager of canine recruitment. “There are so many dogs who need a job – a purpose – and so many of these dogs possess the qualities we look for that make them the perfect candidates for our training program.”

Indeed, the qualities of a good search dog frequently misalign with many pet owners’ idea of a good *family* dog. A dog with the right amount of intensity and perseverance needed for life-saving search work is often very challenging in a pet home. A good search dog doesn’t just love toys. Rather, he has an “obsessive, visceral response to a toy, and an insatiable desire to chase, hunt, and possess it.” This is not the dog whose behavioral needs are met by a daily walk around the neighborhood, some basic training, and a backyard game of fetch.

“Where one person might see destructive energy, we see a great opportunity to redirect that energy into a fun game of hide-and-seek,” explains Stoney.

In search-and-rescue training, the “victim” is hidden with the beloved toy and the dogs are taught to locate the victim’s scent and bark to alert the handler. Upon finding the victim, the dog is rewarded with an exciting game of tug. It’s all a fun game to the canine heroes!

EXPECTING THE UNEXPECTED

One of the biggest challenges facing search-and-rescue canine teams is the ability to train under a range of circumstances that even remotely mimic what they will encounter at an actual disaster site.

“You’re often at the mercy of concrete recycling centers, but that only gives you rubble search,” says Debra Tosch, the foundation’s program and finance administrator, and a former



A 10,000 square foot pile of concrete and other debris seen in the distance is situated near “Search City.” To be certified by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, a canine candidate must find a number of victims in an area larger than what’s shown, within a strict time limit.



Photos by Stephanie Colman

Two railroad cars simulate a derailing scenario. In addition, the NTC features several buses, RVs, planes, boats, and many cars. There is also an area that simulates a collapsed freeway – and things are moved around often, so conditions are never exactly the same for return trainees.

FEMA-certified canine-search specialist. “Maybe you can get access to a building with furniture, but nothing is overturned, so you aren’t really working under realistic conditions.”

Tosch and her canine partner Abby’s first deployment was the World Trade Center collapse on 9/11/01. Because all of their training had been at recycling centers or other pristine, by comparison, sites, Tosch initially worried about her dog’s ability to navigate the complex labyrinth of twisted steel that stood before them. “I’d never seen my dog work on anything like that,” she says.

Fortunately, Abby’s training carried her through the challenging searches. But for Tosch, the experience emphasized the need for a more realistic training center where teams would gain more real-world experience.

“It’s very important to be able to remove questions of, ‘I wonder if my dog can do this?’ and allow handlers to show up feeling like, ‘I know my dog can do this!’” Tosch says.

DISNEYLAND FOR DOG-AND-HANDLER TEAMS

In 2009 the foundation broke ground on what would become a first-of-its-kind, 125-acre National Training Center (NTC) solely dedicated to the training

of canine disaster-search teams. Nestled deep in the Santa Paula foothills, about 90 miles from Los Angeles, the state-of-the-art center connects teams from around the country with skilled professional trainers while they face complex search tasks – scenarios that far exceed what can be staged at typical training sites.

“When the teams come out here, we challenge them. We don’t set them up to fail, but we challenge them. Then they take what they’ve learned back to the team and share with other handlers on their task forces,” says Tosch. “We really want these teams to be prepared when that call comes and they head out the door. That’s how you strengthen disaster response in America.”

There is no shortage of challenges to be had at the training site, which features areas that are dedicated to different types of disasters in varied locations. Elements were designed with input from working handlers who recalled what they found most challenging about various deployments.

“Search City” is currently comprised of multiple buildings, including a convenience store filled with overturned shopping carts (a complex agility challenge) and a two-story tilted house, with rooms in various states of disarray, designed to elicit

feelings of vertigo in the human handlers as they accompany their canine partners. It also includes three Hollywood back-lot-style building facades (a schoolhouse, a firehouse, and a townhouse), each with its own debris pile.

“Industrial Park” is home to a two-car train wreck and simulated freeway bridge collapse. Overturned cars, abandoned RVs, mountains of wood pallets, and the occasional small airplane litter the area. A 10,000 square foot rubble pile rounds out the currently available elements, and a tower where teams can learn to rappel with their dogs is also in the works. Tosch says the exact layout of the elements is expected to change quarterly, allowing teams who visit repeatedly to face new challenges each time.

One of the most interesting features of the NTC is its use of a proprietary scent-delivery system that can deliver live human scent to various places within the buildings, even to locations where it does not appear a human could be. For example, as the victim is stationed in a small outbuilding, his scent can be delivered to a specific area, such as underneath a bathtub in a Search City building. Seeing the dog alert on the bathtub drain can confuse the handler, often leading him to believe his dog is incorrect. Founda-

Photos by Stephanie Colman



The “Earthquake House” was actually built on a slant, to give dogs and handlers alike experience with the strange sensation of negotiating a partially collapsed building. The house is surrounded by rubble and debris that can also be searched.



Inside the Earthquake House is more debris, just as there would be in an actual building that partially collapsed in an earthquake. A nearby building is in a similar state of disarray, filled with toppled grocery carts and fallen shelves.

What We Can Learn From the NDSDF's Approach to Training

Whether your dog is a working search dog, an avid agility competitor, or your daily walking partner and couch companion, a few basic principles hold true, including:

1 Fluency is a critical concept in training. How well does your dog know a behavior? Your dog might correctly perform a set of skills at home or while attending training class, but that doesn't automatically mean he can perform anywhere, anytime, under any conditions.

When dogs fail to correctly perform cued behaviors in new settings, or in the face of distractions, they aren't being stubborn, willful, or dominant, as many people believe. Rather, they are struggling to meet the demands placed upon them in that moment. In order for a dog to truly know a behavior – for it to become fluent – we must invest the time to train for the many types of situations we are likely to encounter with our dogs. See “What Does Your Dog Really Know?” December 2015.

2 Not every dog is the right fit for every home. The decision to share your life with a dog should not be taken lightly. Do your homework before even getting a puppy or dog! This can include researching individual breed qualities (to make sure the dog's likely natural tendencies will be a good fit in your household) and taking the time to find a reputable breeder or rescue organization. (See “Successful Adoptions,” page 18.)

It's also vitally important that everyone in the home is committed to training and management to help the new family member succeed. Dogs aren't born understanding how to co-exist in our complex human world; they rely on us to teach them how to thrive. This takes time. Attending a single session of a training class will not result in a well-trained dog. It's important to make sure you fully understand the amount of work that goes into creating the canine companion you likely imagine when you think about getting a dog.

Still, sometimes, despite our best efforts, a specific dog is not a good match in a certain home. Although this can be heartbreaking, it is often in the best interest of all involved to help the dog find a more appropriate placement by

returning him to the breeder or rescue organization. To that end, we feel that a truly reputable breeder or rescue organization will support clients, offering advice to help remedy the situation when possible, or accepting return of the dog without blaming or shaming the family.

tion trainers oversee the exercise and validate the dog's alert when needed, reminding handlers to trust their dogs.

“As humans, we're visual. The dog might be barking and be totally on the scent, but the handler is using his eyes and thinking there's no way someone can be there,” explains Tosch.

The NTC is also equipped to house handler teams in its 24-bed handler lodge. The lodge helps cut travel-related costs for out-of-area teams and allows teams to train for longer hours, over multiple days, a common real-world experience. This helps teams build the endurance necessary to maintain motivation throughout a mentally and physically challenging search.

In its mission to strengthen disaster response in America, the NDSDF makes training at the NTC financially accessible to teams from all around the country. In addition, its highly trained dogs are placed with approved first-responder handlers at no cost. The entire operation is funded exclusively by corporate and private sponsorships and donations; the Foundation receives no government funding.

WELL RECEIVED

Teresa MacPherson's first glimpse of the NDSDF training center was via helicopter, as she and her task-force canine handler teammates were airlifted into position – another element of “realness” made possible thanks to the foundation's commitment to authenticity. MacPherson, a civilian member of FEMA's Virginia Task Force 1, helps evaluate and train other teams, which allows her to travel to a variety of training sites, often with her dog. Still, she was thrilled to get the chance to experience the National Training Center.

“It's a really cool site,” she says. “They were able to surprise me, they really made me think, and they challenged my dog with a lot of complex scent pictures and agility scenarios. I've done a lot of training, but this was really challenging. We have to expose our dogs to all kinds of different scenarios in training so it

Photo courtesy of the NDSDF



The right match and a commitment to training go a long way toward creating successful relationships between search dogs and their handlers.



Photo courtesy of the NDSDF

Search dog Clancy and Jake Armendariz of California Task Force 2 search a staged train derailment at the NTC. The ever-changing nature of the NTC scenarios keeps things fresh for teams.

week handler's course at the foundation. This shift has led to less handler washout and a better FEMA certification success rate.

For Vasquez, the biggest advantage of the National Training Center is the diverse collection of training scenarios. Not only are the scenarios challenging, thanks to the creative expertise of the on-site training staff, but they consist of elements that are difficult, if not

impossible, to otherwise access. For example, Vasquez says West Coast teams are often known for being especially skilled on rubble piles, as they are readily available. On the other hand, building searches are harder to come by, as the area's homeless population often overruns abandoned buildings. Conversely, East Coast teams are known for being especially good at building searches, but they often lack access to rubble piles.

"At the training center, you have both. We can take advantage of things we don't otherwise have access to and we can access a lot of different training elements in one stop," he says.

all comes together and, when we hit 'the big one,' the dogs aren't surprised, they're prepared."

Firefighter Captain Jason Vasquez of the Los Angeles County Fire Department and a member of California Task Force 2, agrees that the NDSDF's center strengthens the skill set of the dogs trained there. Vasquez has a long history with the foundation. He received his first foundation-trained canine partner in 2004 and has been partnered with two more foundation-trained dogs since then. Vasquez says the growth of the NDSDF, including the development of the National Training Center, has created better prepared, more sophisticated handlers through the creation of an in-depth handler's course and continuing education opportunities.

"The handlers are 100 percent more advanced from when I started," he says. In the past, the task force would recommend a team member to be partnered with a dog, but the team member often didn't begin learning his full range of handler responsibilities until after he was paired with a dog. Now, handlers begin learning about their role as early as six months prior to placement, and they attend a two-

FROM GRASSROOTS TO A LEADERSHIP ROLE

As the foundation continues its mission, another goal is to develop a deployment readiness certification designed to help task forces determine whether or not their certified teams are deployment ready.

"The FEMA certification is the minimum standard needed to go out the door with a task force," says Tosch. "Certification tests the minimum skills required to certify on that particular day, but certification is not deployment."

According to Tosch, FEMA certification is important, but can't be an accurate assessment of deployment readiness, because it doesn't adequately recreate the complex mental and emotional challenges of deployment. The foundation's goal is to create an assessment that would provide teams with a more realistic picture of the myriad challenges – for both dogs and handlers – that exist while on a mission.

"It's so impressive to look at where the foundation started, and to see where they are today," Vasquez says, noting the much-appreciated ability of the organization to maintain a grassroots feel and foundation-family atmosphere.

"That's one of the reasons I keep coming back. I'm proud of my canine partner and I'm proud to be part of such a great organization," he says. 🐾

Stephanie Colman is a writer and dog trainer in Southern California. See page 24 for contact information.

What You Can Do

- *Support the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation in its mission to strengthen disaster response in America. More funding means more trained dogs are paired with first responders, potentially saving lives when disasters strike.*
- *Be sure your shelter knows about the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation in the event they might have a candidate dog.*
- *Learn more about the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation by visiting searchdog-foundation.org. You can even request a tour of the National Training Center.*



The Puppy-Raising Challenge

Managing and training a young puppy can be exhausting, even for highly experienced dog trainers. Here are some tips for taking some of the pressure off.



Nancy Tucker, a professional dog trainer in Quebec, recently adopted a nine-week-old Border Terrier puppy she named Bennigan. After decades of adopting adult rescue dogs, she wanted to do everything in her power to raise the best-adjusted dog she could. Imagine her surprise at learning how exhausting life with a healthy, energetic puppy can be!

I've been a professional dog trainer for 10 years. I've tackled all kinds of behavior issues ranging from mild annoyances, like jumping up, to serious aggression or anxiety problems.

I've doled out training and management advice to dog-owning families expecting babies (of the human kind), guided adopters in their selection of a puppy or adult dog, and counseled clients on what to do after their shiny new puppy finally arrives.

I've taught group classes of various themes, including puppy kindergarten – so many puppy classes, I'd heard and seen it all.

What I hadn't done in forty years, however, was adopt a puppy and bring him into my own home. That's when I discovered through a somewhat rude awakening that I had more learning to do.

My empathy for my puppy clients has grown tenfold since we brought Bennigan, our Border Terrier, home this summer. Up until then, every dog I had adopted was already an adult at

the time of adoption. They each had their own behavior issues, but none of these compared to the challenges I'm currently facing as a new puppy owner.

Puppies are hard work! I thought I knew this, but I didn't really. I knew it on paper and in theory, but I never expected to feel so incredibly inadequate as a puppy owner. I've read some fantastic books and articles on puppy rearing, attended seminars on puppy development, and watched several truly great DVDs that carefully lay out all the important aspects of living with a puppy. What's missing from all of these resources, however, is some crucial information about the realities of living with a puppy.

Here, I'd like to add my own chapters to every puppy book, article, and DVD I've ever learned from. This is the nitty-gritty of puppy rearing that I wish I had received a heads-up on.

Armed with this knowledge, puppy adopters will be in a better position to recognize that what they're living through is normal. They are not failing, their puppy is not evil incarnate, and they will absolutely not be able to accomplish all the tasks outlined in all the best puppy books before their puppy's socialization period is over (and that's okay).

So here they are – the missing chapters, in no particular order.

NEW CHAPTER: YOU WILL BE TIRED

Actually, you will be exhausted. It's common knowledge that puppies will likely not sleep through the night and will need a potty break at some point in the middle of your REM sleep. It sounds simple and easy enough to deal with (after all, it's only temporary). But all those waking hours you spend with your puppy during the day will drain every ounce of energy you can muster. That means that those inter-

rupted nights will feel more difficult because you will be going to bed more exhausted than you normally are.

Then, when you get up in the morning, you're already sleep-deprived and your energy resources are depleted. But your puppy is in fine form! Repeat this night after night – it doesn't take long before you feel you're dragging yourself through your day, hoping your head won't hit the table in the middle of an important meeting by 2 p.m.

It's impossible to say when your puppy will finally begin to sleep through the night. For some lucky families, this happens sooner than later. I was one of them; Bennigan began sleeping through most nights starting at 12 weeks old. But another trainer friend's puppy didn't quite get to that point until well after 20 weeks of age.

■ **MY ADVICE:** If you can sneak in a 10-minute nap during the day, no matter where you are, do it! I've managed to replenish some precious energy during the day by simply laying my head on my desk for just a few minutes, or sitting outside and closing my eyes momentarily. I've even stolen a few winks in my parked car. Every little bit helps. Oh, and remember to silence your phone during your emergency nap.

NEW CHAPTER: YOU MAY LOSE YOUR COOL

The fatigue is going to catch up to you at some point, and as much as you love your puppy and would never dream of harming him in any way, you will reach your boiling point sooner than you

normally would. You may do whatever it is you usually do when you lose patience; for some people, that's raising their voice at their puppy. For others, it might mean snapping at other family members. Whatever "losing your cool" means to you, you will do it.

First, know that it's normal. Don't be too hard on yourself if you do lose patience. When I first admitted to my trainer friends that I was experiencing a surprising level of fatigue and frustration, I was incredibly relieved to hear that they had been there too, once upon a time. Some revealed they had been reduced to tears on more than one occasion.

There are so many mixed emotions involved in raising a puppy. You are totally smitten by the massive amounts of cuteness, and yet wrapped up in that adorableness is also a tiny creature endlessly exploring his world and expressing every need and emotion in a most immediate and unfiltered way.

He may vocalize in ways and at times you don't expect, and for reasons you're not quite sure you can identify. His demeanor will change suddenly – from playful to sleepy; from restful to cranked up and bitey; from calm to "hangry" (hungry and angry). I can't tell you how many clients have called me over the years, convinced their dog is "attacking" them. I never quite understood what they meant until I experienced it myself. More on that later...

Everything is new to him and must be investigated. Every single thing. He will notice items in his environment that you haven't. He will find them, and he will pick them up with his mouth (or test it by chewing on it). For his safety, he must be watched constantly.



This looks bad – but the pup didn't take the book without permission; his owner gave him the outdated text to play with. It's not a puppy toy that many trainers would approve of, but since he doesn't swallow any of the paper, it keeps him busy, and he hasn't tried to chew on any other books in the house, she decided to let him thoroughly investigate it.

No matter how puppy-proof you think your home or yard is, he'll find at least 20 ways it isn't!

All of these scenarios, coupled with the fatigue you're enduring, will shorten your fuse. This is the moment you wonder what you've gotten yourself into and whether you're up for the task. You are not alone!

■ **MY ADVICE:** Do something for yourself as often as you can. Much like the tiny power naps, you'll need to steal these moments whenever you can – usually while your puppy is sleeping. Also, talk to other puppy owners, or to adult dog owners who have been through this themselves and who can tell you that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. When you realize that everyone else has felt the same way, it's a huge morale booster.

NEW CHAPTER: SAY BYE-BYE TO YOUR TO-DO LIST

I am a list-maker. I tend to add items to my daily list almost as often as I check off a completed task. This habit transforms it into a perpetual to-do list, a challenge to complete even under the best of circumstances – in other words, without a puppy in the picture.

With a puppy, I've been lucky to get through even a single task on my list! I've learned to either toss the list aside during these early weeks, or to at least whittle it down to just the basic necessities. Because the truth is, it won't get done.

There's no use causing yourself frustration by assigning yourself tasks that you can't reasonably get around to doing. Lose the list, or cut it down, or delegate the tasks to others if possible.

■ **MY ADVICE:** On a personal note, I found it far more important during the early weeks to focus on taking advantage of my puppy's socialization period to do things with him, rather than worry about which household chores weren't getting done. The house has been a fine mess since our puppy arrived, and I'm okay with that.

Puppies benefit from getting a lot of exercise, interspersed with lots of napping opportunities and good food. Owners should be aware, though, that over-tired and/or hungry puppies may behave in unpredictable ways.



NEW CHAPTER: IS MY PUPPY POSSESSED?

I mentioned earlier how there have been moments in my career when I've received calls from puppy owners concerned about their dog's temperament. "He'll just suddenly attack us out of the blue," they'll say. "I think there's something wrong with him. He's really aggressive!"

I think I can count on one hand the number of times I've met the puppy in question and actually referred to a veterinary behaviorist, based on behaviors I found worrisome. Otherwise, what I usually witnessed appeared to be very exuberant puppy mouthing and biting, often from an overtired puppy who simply needed some quiet time and a nap, or from a puppy who was under-stimulated and needed more outlets for his bottled-up energy. Either way, it was usually nothing to worry about.

And then one day, out of the blue, Bennigan looked like a puppy who had – for all intents and purposes – gone berserk. It started with a sudden case of the zoomies (when your dog runs at full speed rather erratically with his ears back, eyes wide, and his butt tucked beneath him). The next thing I knew he charged at me and climbed my leg. He began tearing at my pant-leg with his little shark teeth while emitting a most dramatic growl and whine. There was simply no calming him, no distracting him, no getting away from him. It was quite distressing!

In the end, I scooped him up with my hands while he wriggled violently, and put him in his crate. I shut the door in one swift motion and attempted to catch my breath. What on earth was happening? I had lost complete control over my tiny puppy, and he had turned into an angry, fanged beast!

Within two minutes he was fast asleep, but almost as quickly, he was awake again, barking and howling from his crate. I took him out immediately (this is no time for "discipline," nor is it a "teaching moment" – puppies are babies, and this type of behavior announces a need that hasn't been met). Although it wasn't officially his feeding time, I fed him a small portion of his food on the spot.

Just like that, Bennigan was calm again. He went right back to sleep and awoke a happy, playful puppy after a long nap.

Over the following days and weeks, I learned that a combination of hunger and fatigue produces this type of behavior in my puppy. It's not often that both circumstances happen at the same time, but when they do, I can now tell long before things get out of hand, and Bennigan gets a little food and a nap.

Had I not witnessed this type of over-the-top behavior myself, I would have thought my clients may have been exaggerating in their description of the event. It was truly quite dramatic and upsetting. I thought of videotaping Bennigan's behavior to show other trainers, but it only happened a couple of times before I figured out the puzzle, and I was far more focused on handling the issue than filming it!

■ **MY ADVICE:** Find out what your puppy needs. At such a young age, a

puppy's needs are really quite simple: Is he hungry? Is he over-tired? Does he need to relieve himself? Is he all alone? Chances are, responding to these four questions will resolve the issue.

NEW CHAPTER: WHEN IT COMES TO SOCIALIZATION, JUST DO YOUR BEST

As a trainer and behavior consultant, I'm painfully aware of what can result from too little or poorly executed socialization. That's why I emphasize the importance of proper and timely socialization to all my clients with puppies. I give them a long list of socialization tasks to accomplish, ideally before their puppies reach 12 weeks of age. "You really don't want to let this slip," I say. "If you do only one thing for your pup over the next few weeks, make sure it's this!"

Well, ha ha; the joke's on me. I wasn't able to complete even *half* of the tasks I recommend to my clients! I'm self-employed with a flexible schedule, have no kids in the house, am healthy and fully mobile, and have a spouse who can help. Plus, I'm a professional trainer! And yet, I couldn't do it. I can't imagine how someone with a full-time job and kids could possibly execute a "perfect" socialization program!

■ **MY ADVICE:** Seriously consider what canine social skills your dog will really need and focus your precious

and limited time on those. Yes, in theory your dog will have a better crack at being super-well socialized if you can offer him a massive array of positive experiences – there’s no doubt about that. But if out of a list of 100 experiences you can realistically tackle only 20 of them, pick the 20 that most closely match what you need your dog to be familiar with when he’s an adult. (My puppy did not get to meet farm animals, for example, and that’s okay, because the likelihood of that type of encounter taking place in the future is slim. While it’s an excellent idea, it was not a priority!)

Thanks to the discovery that I was unable to cross off half of the items on my usual socialization checklist, I’ve now made some changes to my puppy consults. For starters, my advice sounds a little more like this: “Look, ideally, here’s what I’d like you to do. Try your best. Be kind to your dog. Roll in the grass with him. Be patient.

Buy yourself some wine. Send me an email when you’re so tired you just want to cry but are too embarrassed to admit to your non-dog-owning friends that an eight-pound puppy is kicking your butt.” Because honestly, this is the more likely scenario!

THEY GROW UP SO FAST

In the end, it’s less about doing everything perfectly and more about setting your own priorities. What do you really need your puppy to know when he’s an adult? Focus on that.

Do your best to cover the material presented in all those terrific books and DVDs – and the syllabus from the puppy kindergarten class you’ve signed up for (definitely enroll in one of those) – without stressing over accomplishing *all* the recommended exercises. Give yourself the benefit of this “missing material,” and take some pressure off your shoulders. By the time you and your puppy have graduated from a

puppy kindergarten class or two, you will likely be handling much of your puppy’s relentless, curious, adorable behavior with aplomb . . . and will have a good foundation on which to prepare for mystifying canine adolescent behavior!

Remember to take a moment to acknowledge everything you’re doing right, and don’t worry too much about there being something wrong with your puppy (there very likely is absolutely nothing wrong with him), or about feeling like you are an inadequate trainer. Believe me, even the pros feel this way!

Enjoy your dog’s puppyhood while it lasts. Take lots of pictures and take the time to laugh, play, and bond. You’ll be just fine. 🐾

Nancy Tucker, CPDT-KA, is a full-time trainer, behavior consultant, and seminar presenter in Quebec, Canada. See page 24 for contact information.



DOG DAYS— All Year Long!

For a dog lover, this is the perfect calendar! Not only will you meet a dozen of the most winsome, lively calendar canines we could find, but also, each month you’ll get timely, pertinent guidance for keeping your own dog healthy and happy throughout the year. In this year’s edition, each month is introduced with suggested goals – achievements that can improve the relationship between you and your dog!

WDJ’s 2018 Calendar is generously sized to make it easy for you to fill in birthdays, anniversaries, vet appointments, and all the dates you need to remember.

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Successful Adoptions

For the best odds of finding your canine soulmate – a dog who fits as well into your life and family as you can imagine – follow these dog-adoption tips.



It's a good idea for parents to initially come to the shelter without the kids. Once they've found a likely candidate, then they can bring the kids, telling them, "We are here to meet just this one dog (or two)." That way, the family doesn't get split in pieces with different people pulling for different dogs, and the carefully considered selection criteria going out the window.

So, you're thinking about adopting a dog. Wonderful! Your whole future with your prospective new dog is ahead of you, and all things are possible. Visions of agility, rally, obedience, trick and/or nosework titles may be dancing in your head, or perhaps long, relaxing walks in a nearby park and snuggles in front of the fireplace on cold winter nights. Maybe you'd like to give back to the community with the warm comfort of a therapy dog. Perhaps you're looking for a pal for your child.

Whatever your reasons for adopting, with so many dogs looking for their forever humans, how is a dog lover to know which one will be the right match for her family? While it's not easy to sort through all your adoption options, and there are no guarantees that you will end up with your perfect dog, there are steps you can take to help you make a wise, educated choice and increase the odds that you will find the dog you hope for.

WHAT KIND OF DOG?

To start, engage the entire family in discussions about what kind of dog you want. If you live alone, have the discussions with yourself. Some things to think about:

■ **Breed.** Purebred? Mixed breed? Don't care? More and more competitions are open to mixed breeds these days, so a desire to compete no longer limits you to purebred dogs. I have owned and loved both pure and mixed breeds. While a purebred dog may be more predictable in terms of size and behavior tendencies, there are no guarantees. I know dog training professionals who have acquired their purebred puppies from reputable breeders and still have had significant behavioral issues. And some of my mixed breeds have been the best dogs ever.

(Note: If you decide to purchase a puppy from a breeder, the process will be very different from that described below. A good breeder will guide you in making your selection. Just be sure to avoid puppies that appear fearful and/or poorly socialized.)

■ **Size.** Even if you're not set on a particular breed, size can matter. I was always a "big dog" person – until we adopted our first Pomeranian. Now I am smitten with small dogs as well as large. Toy-sized dogs may be too fragile for some small children – and can become aggressive in order to protect themselves from unpredictable toddler behavior. Large dogs may be a hazard for small children, especially large active dogs who can easily bowl over a wee human. A bite to a child from a large dog can be far more serious than a bite from a small dog. Small dogs can get underfoot, while large dogs can counter-surf more easily.

■ **Coat.** Long-coated dogs are undeniably gorgeous; however, most of those coats require work – some require a *lot* of work. Do you have time to do a lot of grooming? Do you even want to? A professional groomer is an added

pet-care expense you'll need to figure into your budgeting. Don't count on the kids promising to do all the brushing; that can be one of those sources of tension, and it's not fair to the dog to neglect the grooming just because the kids are supposed to do it. Dogs with long and short coats shed.

■ **Color.** Do you care about color? Maybe you don't, but maybe someone else in the family does. Just one more thing to get clear about before venturing out to meet dogs.

■ **Age.** Puppy? Adolescent? Adult? Senior? Puppies are perilously cute – and they can be a handful, especially with small children in the home. (I tell clients all the time, “I am a dog training/behavior professional, and I don't adopt puppies!”)

My preferred age is six months to a year – old enough to be past the worst of the puppy stuff, but still young enough to be a relatively clean slate, with many years to look forward to spending together. That said, one of the loveliest dogs I ever adopted was an eight-year-old Rough Collie. Deciding in advance what ages you'll consider can help prevent an impulse adoption.

■ **Personality.** Calm? High-energy? Snuggler? Independent? Bold? Cautious? It helps to have a picture of your ideal temperament in mind.

■ **Health.** I respect and admire people who take on dogs who have significant health or behavior problems – but I encourage clients to look for physically and behaviorally healthy dogs.

It's easy to feel sorry for the hurt and frightened ones – but one should be aware that they can require a *mas-*

sive commitment of time, energy, and financial resources, and *still* may never be the satisfactory companions you had hoped for. If you do decide to take on a “project dog,” know full well that you may be in for quite a ride. It's important that your new family member not be the source of tension, so the more agreement you have in advance, the better.

Giving thought to these qualities in advance can, again, help you make an educated choice when you are overwhelmed by all the beseeching eyes in shelter kennels.

ORGANIZE YOUR LIST

Now it's time to organize your thoughts and to get clear about the attributes you hope to find in a new canine family member as well as the traits you would prefer not to have to deal with. Write down your likes and dislikes in columns headed by these categories:

- **Must Have**
- **Would Like to Have**
- **Would Be Okay With**
- **Would Prefer Not**
- **Absolutely Not**

Take the list with you when you go

to meet your adoption prospects. You don't necessarily have to rigidly hold yourself to all of them, but if you are tempted by a dog who has few of your family's “must have” traits, and many of your “would prefer not” traits, at least you will be reminded that you are making a conscious choice to step outside the lines you have drawn. Also, the list may be useful if you need to remind other family members that they agreed to certain criteria (no puppies, no dogs over 50 pounds, etc.).

SOURCES FOR ADOPTION

While you're thinking about the traits you want in your next dog, start doing your homework about potential sources for your adoptee. Does your local shelter have a good reputation? Are veterinarians seeing a lot of health issues from some of the rescues or shelters in your area? If you look outside your immediate area, you'll need to be willing to travel. *Always* meet your potential new family member in person before agreeing to adopt.

Good options for sources of your next dog are:

■ **Reputable shelters.** There are all kinds of shelters, good and bad. Visit the ones in your area. Avoid adopting from shelters that appear overcrowded, dirty, or where staff is unfriendly. Ask if they have adoption counselors to help you with your choice. A good shelter

Let the kids know ahead of time that you probably won't bring home a dog that day; if the dog turns out to be perfect, then taking the dog home that day can be a happy surprise. But if the previously selected dog turns out to be uncomfortable with kids, take a pass on that candidate and keep looking. For everyone's happiness and safety, dogs that live with kids should love kids, not just tolerate them.



What about those adorable pups in the cardboard box at the supermarket or in a pen alongside the road or in a parking lot? Not only will such a purchase likely fail to give you the benefit of any reliable information as to the health status of the puppies or the behavioral health of the parents, the sale will only reward the seller and encourage further breeding and sales.

will insist that all family members meet potential canine adoptees and are likely to also insist on meet-and-greets with any current canines in your home.

■ **Reputable rescue groups.** There are many excellent rescue groups from which you can adopt your canine companion. Ask your local animal control agency and your veterinarian if the group is reputable; both are likely to have had interactions with local rescue staff members and animals from the rescue. It's also a good idea to consult online sites like guidestar.org and charitycheck101.org to confirm whether an organization is a legitimate 501(c)3 non-profit organization.

Good rescues should be able to provide veterinary and vaccination records for their wards. Ask for references from previous owners or adopters – *and call them*. Visit housing locations for the dogs. Trust your instincts if you experience red flags, such as an unwillingness to answer questions.

■ **Responsible breeders.** Good breeders will screen you as carefully as you want to screen them. They will have complete health records for all their pups, won't object to you seeing the puppies' living area, and meeting the mom – and the dad, too, if he's on the premises. They will have done lots of foundation socialization work (ask them!). They are likely to have a contract that includes a spay/neuter requirement if the puppy isn't going to be shown or bred and will commit to taking a dog back anytime during the dog's lifetime if that becomes necessary.

A breeder who will sell a puppy to



anyone who has the purchase price is *not* a responsible breeder.

■ **Websites.** There are a number of websites that serve as clearinghouses for shelters and rescue groups, listing dogs of various breeds and mixes around the country (and some in Canada). The best known are petfinder.com, adoptapet.com, and rescueme.org.

■ **Friends or family members.** Sometimes, sadly, people must give up a dog for a legitimate reason. It can be a significant advantage to all concerned if a dog can be placed in a new home without having to experience the stress of a stay in a shelter or rescue, and if the new owner can communicate directly with the former owner about the dog's behavior and health history.

Then there are the sources to avoid at all costs:

■ **Pet stores.** *Never, ever.* Despite what the store employees may tell you, *no* responsible breeder sells puppies to pet stores. If you buy a puppy from a pet store, you are without a doubt buying a puppy mill puppy. **Don't. Do. It.**

(Note – this is not the same as adopting from a non-profit group that is holding an adoption event at a pet store. That can be acceptable.)

■ **Craigslist.** Lots of scammers on craigslist.org. Enough said.

■ **Parking lots.** Hoarders and disreputable rescues are notorious for agreeing to meet you halfway somewhere to “save you the trouble” of a long drive. If you aren't allowed to see the conditions your potential adoptee is being housed in, chances are it's not a good situation.

■ **Dog brokers.** Many people are not aware that this is a “thing” – trust me, it is. Dog brokers gather dogs and puppies from shelters, rescue groups, puppy mills, online ads, etc., and sell them for a profit. Given that the dogs are more likely to be well treated, accurately represented, and carefully placed in screened homes (for lower adoption fees) from the first shelter or rescue they found themselves in, it's unconscionable to pay a broker for them.

Dog brokers often have websites advertising various dogs that they don't actually have in their possession. When you express interest in a particular

dog, they may say, “Oh she just got adopted, but I can find you another (insert breed of your choice) and will get back to you.” Then they scour all their sources to find one, and contact you. Or, they may just meet you with a dog that looks similar and try to pass it off as the dog you saw a photo of.

■ **Non-reputable shelters, rescue groups, breeders, hoarders, etc.** It may be tempting to rescue a dog from a bad situation; just be aware that any support given to these organizations helps perpetuate their efforts.

START SEARCHING

So – you’ve made your list of desired qualities and located a well-regarded shelter, rescue group, or breeder, and are ready to start your search. Perhaps you’ve already identified a prospect on an organization’s website. What now? Go meet some dogs!

1 **Watch: If you can, stand back and watch your adoption prospect for a while.**

Ideally, he comes forward and happily greets all visitors. Is he an equal opportunity greeter, happy to meet children and adults, men and women, people of different races, and people with odd mannerisms? If he’s in a foster home rather than a kennel, again, watch and note how he interacts with any humans present.

Concerns: If he happily greets some people but is troubled by others, he may need significant behavior work to help him accept those types of people. If he barks and lunges at passing humans or dogs, he could be generally reactive or aggressive, or it could just be barrier reactivity. This behavior may or may not continue when he is no longer kenneled. If it does, you will be doing significant behavior modification work.

If he moves to the back of the kennel and avoids contact with humans, he is likely fearful and/or undersocialized. *You cannot fix fear with love alone.* Dogs who are fearful will require a lot of management and behavior modification in order to be comfortable

Adoption Options: Progress Isn't Perfect

Adopting a dog hasn’t gotten any easier in the 40-plus years I’ve been involved professionally with animals. My two decades in animal sheltering (1976 to 1996) were prior to the emergence of the so-called no-kill movement. In those days the art of doing behavior assessments for shelter dogs was *just* becoming the norm. We did our best to make available for adoption only those dogs who were likely to be successful companions and who could function reasonably well in society. We then trusted our adoption counselors to help make good matches, with a goal of placing every dog in a life-long, loving home where canine and human were well-suited to each other’s needs. We weren’t perfect, for sure, but we tried. Even then, finding the right dog was not an easy task for a prospective adopter.

Two significant changes have occurred in the past 20 years that can make it even harder. First, well-meaning, warmhearted “no-kill” animal lovers have made it their admirable mission to reduce the numbers of dogs and cats euthanized in shelters around the United States. Their efforts, alongside the ongoing spay/neuter and educational programs and hard work of shelters over the years, have not been fruitless; euthanasia numbers have dropped significantly. An estimated 18-20 million dogs and cats were euthanized in shelters in the 1980s; today’s estimate is two to three million. That’s great news, to be sure.

But there has *also* been an exponential proliferation of hoarders (individuals and rescue groups who take on far more animals than they can care for). Today, many dogs are “saved” from shelters – many of which are eager to improve their live-release numbers – only to be “rescued” by hoarders and forced to suffer from overcrowding, poor sanitation, disease, malnutrition, and death in the hands of their would-be saviors. Some supposedly no-kill shelters have, themselves, become institutional hoarders.

Plus, in the quest for better numbers, a significant percentage of non-hoarding adoption sources are placing poorly socialized dogs, dogs with other behavior problems, and even dogs with a known history of aggression. (A recent example: A rescue group in Virginia adopted a dog with a known history of aggression to a family that included a 90-year-old grandmother. The dog killed the grandmother on the first day in his new home.) Those who adopt from both hoarding and non-hoarding situations often find themselves facing significant health and/or behavioral challenges with their new canine companions.

To make matters worse, several recent studies suggest that shelter behavior assessments aren’t as useful as we have long believed them to be. The studies show that not only are there a lot of “false positives” – dogs who show undesirable behavior in the assessment but not in a home environment, meaning they may be euthanized unnecessarily – but also, there are many “false negatives” – dogs who *don’t* show behaviors in the assessment that *do* show up later in the home, meaning adopters may be given false assurances about their new dogs’ behaviors. As a result, some organizations have discontinued *any* assessments, lowering or removing adoption screening standards, harking back to the unfortunate old days of “You want him? Plunk down your adoption fee and he’s yours” – the standard practice when I started working in shelters.



Super cute . . . but does he have a record of biting people . . . in the face? It would be good to know.

and safe (not a fear-based biting risk). Again, this may just be a response to the overwhelmingly stressful kennel environment, or it could be a bigger behavior issue. Some dogs behave like entirely different dogs when they are removed from their kennels and taken to a more normal environment, such as a get-acquainted room.



This dog passed the parents' assessments and seemed calm and sweet. However, she was alarmed by and fearful of the younger, more exuberant boys. A dog who enjoyed (or ignored) spontaneous, lively kid activity would be a better fit.

2 Engage: Assuming you are comfortable with his responses to others, approach the kennel.

Does he come up to greet you? When your other family members approach, does he stay engaged and friendly? Do you like what you see? If so, continue.

Concerns: He needs to respond well to *all* family members. A dog who is afraid of or reacts badly to one or more family member will likely be a source of conflict and is not a good choice.

3 Meet: Now it's time to see him in a different, less-stressful environment.

Hopefully, the shelter or rescue has a quiet room or outside fenced area where you can spend get-acquainted time with the dog, away from the chaos of the kennels. Watch as the staff person or volunteer leashes

him and removes him from the kennel. Does he avoid them and/or their touch? Do they have difficulty leashing him?

Concerns: Discomfort with or avoidance of close human contact can be an indication of lack of socialization or of abuse. This may require moderate to significant behavioral work.

4 Interact: Spend time with the dog, preferably in a separate room or fenced area.

Give him a little time to sniff and explore the room, without making an effort to engage him in any way at first. After he's explored the room a bit, does he turn his attention to you and your other family members? Does he interact appropriately with you and other family members? Will he play with toys? Does he appear to have had any training? (Most dogs who have had some training will at least respond to a "Sit" cue.) Can he calm down and settle after you play with him, or does he stay aroused? Is he mouthy (putting his teeth on human skin)?

Think about how his behaviors will mesh with your family. Is he too energetic for your children? Does he pull too hard on the leash for them (or you!) to safely walk him? Are any of your family members afraid of him? Conversely, does he have no interest in you? Does he run away, or hide?

Concerns: The dog you adopt needs to be an integral member of your family. If you have children, the dog must *adore* small humans, and demonstrate this during your family's interactions. "Tolerate" isn't good enough. If he has behaviors that are wildly inappropriate, or that threaten the safety of

family members, he will be a source of tension, and will likely end up shut away from the family a good part of the time, or perhaps returned to the adoption agency.

5 Ask: Shelter/rescue personnel may have additional information that they have not yet shared.

Was a behavior assessment done? (Remember to take assessment information with a grain of salt; see "Adoption Options" sidebar, page 21.) Is there an owner questionnaire that you could see? Behavior notes from staff and volunteers? Medical records? More information is always better.

6 Think and discuss: Assuming all has gone reasonably well so far, have a family discussion (or a mental discussion with yourself).

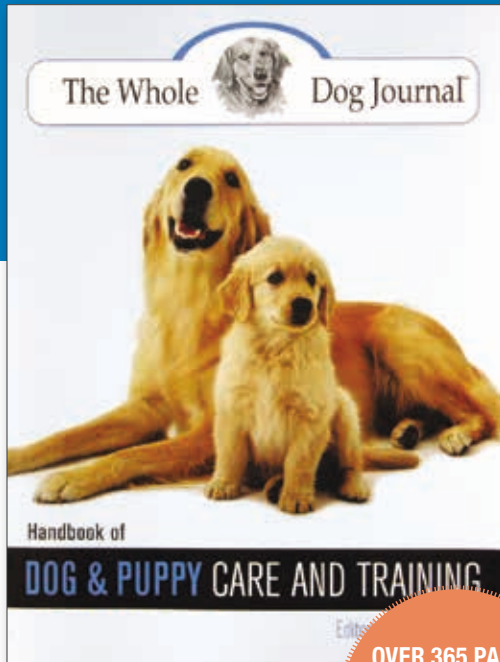
There are lots of dogs in need of homes. If this one isn't a good fit, there will be one who is. Be willing to wait.

On the other hand, if this *is* the right dog for you, full speed ahead! Get ready to comply with any additional adoption requirements the organization may have (fill out an application, landlord check, meet your current pets, etc.) and then be prepared for a lifetime of joy and fun with your new family member. 🐾

Author Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, of Fairplay, Maryland, is WDJ's Training Editor. Miller is also the author of many books on positive training. Her newest is Beware of the Dog: Positive Solutions for Aggressive Behavior in Dogs. See page 24 for information on her books, and classes for dog owners and trainers.

What you can do

- Give careful thought in advance to the qualities you and your family want in your new dog. Don't allow yourselves to be swayed by an adorable face if the dog behind the face doesn't meet at least most of your desired criteria.
- Take your time. There are lots of dogs looking for their forever families. You might as well hold out for one who will do well in your home.
- Consider utilizing the services of a training/behavior professional if you are not confident in your ability to make a good choice. Many trainers are aware of dogs, perhaps belonging to former clients, who need new homes for any number of sad reasons (divorce, illness, financial difficulties, etc.).



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