

EASE Education



Can you be a dog's best friend?



*A PRACTICAL GUIDE
FOR PROSPECTIVE NEW
DOG OWNERS*

by

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CAN YOU BE A DOG'S BEST FRIEND?

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CAN YOU BE A DOG'S BEST FRIEND?

Introduction

Having entered into dog ownership with a lot of heart but little understanding, I soon found out that 'ignorance is not bliss' where canine matters are concerned! Some years down the road, having learnt so much from our cherished canine companion, Bobby, and as a student of dog psychology, I have written this booklet in an endeavour to assist prospective owners think about what is involved in caring for a dog.

If you're thinking of caring for a pet dog for the first time, please read on...



Owning a dog is a big responsibility and you will need to be prepared to invest a fair amount of time, energy and resources into helping your dog settle happily into its new home. Your new companion will soon return your investment by giving you a very precious thing – their TRUST.



This booklet aims to help you think about the various aspects of dog ownership before you embark upon this exciting adventure!

Robo-dog versus real dog!

To start, we'll have a look at some of the natural canine behaviour that you can expect, as illustrated in this short story.

–When I was a youngster in the early 70s I loved watching Dr Who on the TV. In those days K9, which was the first robot dog we'd ever seen, was a fully functioning part of the series. He was really cute, in a robo-dog way, and caught the imagination of everyone with his 'Yes Master' response with his various bleeps and clicks that seem to accompany its wheeling around obediently to Dr Who's commands.

My step-mother often remarked that K9 was the only sort of dog she would ever consider having because it was so clean and would never do any of the annoying things that dogs do. The following comparisons between K9 and real dogs highlight aspects of dog behaviour which can be a challenge for the unprepared dog owner.

-  *K9 was obedient, doing what it was programmed to do without needing regular training sessions to learn basic commands.*
-  *It was quiet, responding only with various bleeps and mechanical sounds, so there were no problems with inappropriate barking, howling or whining.*

- 🐾 *It didn't eat – so there were no food bills to worry about.*
- 🐾 *It didn't make a mess as it was made of metal and electric wiring – so no accidents on the carpet indoors, or poop-scooping when out walking.*
- 🐾 *K9 didn't chew, therefore valuable or important items didn't need to be kept out of canine reach. (Dog's don't automatically know the difference between their chew-toys and the rest of the household contents.)*
- 🐾 *There was no demand for 'walkies', and there were no worries of it running off after other dogs or not coming when called whilst off the lead.*
- 🐾 *And it never needed to see the vet to have routine vaccinations or preventative treatments for worms, fleas and ticks – so it was really cheap to run and didn't bring parasites into the home.*
- 🐾 *K9 didn't shed fur come in with muddy paws or having rolled in unmentionables outside – so there was no extra cleaning and washing to keep everything clean.*
- 🐾 *K9 could be programmed to switch off so was never prone to boredom from lack of activity and so it didn't try to create its own amusement by getting up to mischief ("The devil makes work for idle paws!")*
- 🐾 *And, blissfully, K9 didn't fuss when left on its own – so there was no howling and barking from loneliness and therefore no noise complaints from neighbours (some dogs hate being alone even for short periods.)*
- 🐾 *K9 wasn't interested in procreation and therefore there were no embarrassing episodes of chasing the females or transposing its desires onto the leg of an unsuspecting visitor to the house.*
- 🐾 *It didn't dig up the garden, so any lovely flower bed that had been carefully planted could remain intact.*
- 🐾 *Finally, K9 didn't have teeth, and therefore there was no worry about it growling and biting children or the postman, or chasing small animals with the intent to grab and kill.*

My step-mother is, in fact, a cat lover, and the independent and clean feline nature suits her lifestyle far more than any pet dog ever could. However, I must say that most dog lovers soon learn to cope with the various challenges that their canine companion may present, recognising the wonderful companionship and fun they bring.

Will you love me tomorrow?

This section is to help you think about circumstances that could adversely affect your dog in the future. The arrival of a new baby in the family can throw the dog's life into chaos and, sadly, it is not uncommon for the previously cherished pet to be relegated out of the love and attention it was used to receiving. There is no doubt that a baby would need all your time and care and, should an expanding family be on the agenda, you may decide that it would be wiser to wait until you have the time and space to offer a dog a stable and settled home.

However, if you decide to have a dog now, and hope to have a family a little later, you can take steps to minimise the unsettlement that such a significant change will bring:

🐾 You can ensure that you choose either an adult 'child-proof' dog, (that is, one with a proven history of being safe with young children) or a puppy that you will thoroughly socialise and acclimatise to children of all ages.



🐾 It is important to carefully research the type of dog you will have because certain breeds are not always suitable to live alongside babies and toddlers. For example, Border Collies have a tendency to herd and can nip ankles in the process, and some terriers have a particularly predatory instinct that can make parents feel uneasy.

🐾 Another useful consideration is to have clear and consistent boundaries in the home, right from its first day. If the whole family is consistent in teaching the dog that certain areas, are out of bounds, you can enjoy peace of mind knowing that you have established safe dog-free zones for the children or other small pets that may feel threatened by a canine presence in the home.

Dogs do not automatically know how they should react with these funny new arrivals – baby humans! Young children and dogs present a rather challenging combination, and they should **NEVER** be left without adult supervision, however much the dog is trusted.

The higher-pitched voices, yelling and screaming, together with the quick movements of kids, can get a dog 'hyped up' and excited. Young children are more on a level with the dog's most powerful weapon – its teeth – hence the need for close supervision.

Don't bite off more than you can chew

You may already have an idea of what size and age of dog you would like, and may even have a particular breed in mind. This is an important area to research because if you take on more than you can handle you will soon run into problems. Reputable breeders and animal rescue shelters are more than happy to give advice on the sort of dog you're considering, and can help you to make a sensible choice.

Find out as much as possible about the character of the dog you are interested in. Important things to consider are how that particular dog is likely to fit into your home-life and get on with all the family including other pets. Is it used to children, and is it likely to chase small animals? Does it have behavioural problems, and what is it like when left on its own? At the end of the day if it doesn't work out between owner and dog, it's always the dog who loses out. Testament to this can be seen in the shelters full of 'unwanted' dogs of all sizes, ages and breeds.

TYPE

It's not a dog's looks that are important – it's the character and compatibility with your lifestyle and household that counts. Some breeds are prone to certain things, such as Border Collies who love to work, do agility and play fly-ball, and generally need lots of exercise and mental activity to keep them happy. A toy dog, such as a Pekinese, can only take so much exercise and will need daily grooming. Terriers like to dig whenever and wherever they can, and tend to chase small animals. Certain breeds are highly active and on the go all the time, whilst others are voluntary couch-potatoes – it's important to get the right match for you.



Dogs that come from a working stock, for example Springer Spaniels, Labradors, or certain working Terriers, will be need more activity and things to do than dogs from show or pet stock because they are bred to be on the go a lot more. Therefore new owners seeking a quiet, calm pet might be best advised to avoid dogs from working lines.

SIZE & STRENGTH

Whatever size dog you have do remember that you will always need to be in control – not in a dominant way but through having kindly and consistently trained your dog to respond to certain cues, such as 'come', 'stay', 'stop', 'sit' and 'down'. Many dogs are surprisingly strong and even a medium-sized dog can be powerful enough to pull over their owner.

It is best to think carefully about what you can cope with comfortably; to help you in this you might like to consider these questions:

- 🐾 What size and strength of dog can I manage, especially as I'm new to dog training? (Large, powerful breeds need experienced owners.)
- 🐾 What can I afford in food bills? (Large dogs generally eat more, and those on special veterinary diets will obviously cost more to feed.)
- 🐾 What breed and size can I accommodate comfortably where I live?
- 🐾 What size of dog will be safe in my garden (to prevent it leaping over the fence or crawling through small gaps in the hedge)?
- 🐾 What size will comfortably fit in my car?

EXERCISE & ACTIVITIES

It may surprise you how much exercise and mental stimulation some dogs need to keep them really fit, healthy and happy. Again it is worth asking yourself a few things to guide you towards the right sort of companion:

- 🐾 How much exercise can I offer and will this be enough for the dog I want?
- 🐾 What sort of activities will it need to keep it happy – mentally and physically? (All dogs need daily walks, and most need regular short play sessions or other activities to prevent boredom.)
- 🐾 Will I want my dog to join me in particular activities, eg, hiking, active weekends away, running etc? (You'll need a dog which is willing and physically able to do so.)

GROOMING AND GENERAL CARE

It is important to think about the time needed to keep your dog's coat in good condition:

- 🐾 Short-haired, smooth-coated dogs need little in the way of grooming.
- 🐾 Certain breeds will need regular visits to the dog parlour for clipping.
- 🐾 Most long-haired dogs need daily grooming to prevent matting.
- 🐾 Some dogs shed a lot of fur on a regular basis (more vacuuming).

It is worth noting that some breeds dribble/slobber a lot (due to the shape of their mouth and jaw), which not everyone is comfortable with.

AGE

Puppy love

The appeal of puppies is very strong as most dogs look adorable whilst in the cute bundle-of-fur stage. However, there's a teenager and adult waiting to emerge! This isn't a problem as long as you've got lots of time, patience, energy and 'know-how' to facilitate the transition from puppy to a fully-grown happy adult.

Puppies can be great fun and it means that you do get the chance to really equip your canine pal with all the everyday experiences, sights and sounds to which it needs to become accustomed. Puppies have a specific window of opportunity (their first four months of life) in which they need to become accustomed to and experience in a positive way everything they may come across in life for the rest of their years. This is called 'the socialisation period'. As long as you do your research and honestly do have the time, patience and wherewithal, you can look forward to a lasting and loving relationship – and lots of hard work and fun along the way!



Remember, breeders who are unable to let you see the mother with the puppies may be connected with the puppy farming trade and are best avoided. If you see anything that concerns you in your search for a puppy, do not hesitate to contact the RSPCA who can investigate the circumstances.

The fully-programmed canine 'hard disc'

An adult dog will come with its 'hard disc' fully programmed, which means it may not know some of the basics in life – such as house-training, walking on a leash, and simple commands to 'stay' and 'sit'. It depends, of course, on what its life experience has taught them, and how successfully it was socialised as a pup. It could have learned unwelcome habits, or may have behavioural problems such as reactivity towards other dogs. Adult dogs can learn new things but it takes longer to teach them, and there could be some responses which you may have to learn to manage long term.

Golden oldies

Mature dogs can make wonderful pets, and may suit you if you wish to bypass the exuberance and high activity of the youthful years. Old dogs can sometimes end up in shelters due to their owner dying, or as a result of callous owners who fancy a 'younger model'. With the golden oldies 'what you see is what you get' – which means that you can establish a workable routine that helps your dog to settle in and happily live out its remaining years with the extra comfort and care old age calls for.

“A dog is for life”

The motto from the National Canine Defence League is so true. Whatever age of dog you choose, an important consideration is that you will want to care for and support your new canine friend through the different stages of life. As we all know, dogs have a much shorter life span than humans living to around 10 to 14 years. In many respects dogs age in much the same way as we do. They often become slower both physically and mentally, and you will need to adapt their routine to accommodate these natural infirmities, whilst at the same time ensuring they maintain a good quality of life with regular veterinary input.

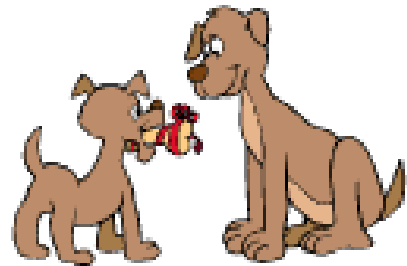
Some important doggy basics

It's easy to miss the fact that dogs do have their own agenda in life. We can think that their sole aim in life is to please us, their owners, but they do have their own wants and needs to satisfy.

Basically your dog will need your companionship, regular food, and lots of walks. Their 'walkies' aren't just vital for keeping fit and trim, but also provide a great source of social exchange with other dogs. The canine sense of smell is highly sophisticated and the constant sniffing is their way of finding out who has been where, with whom, doing what – their way of catching up on the local news and gossip.

Dogs are very sociable creatures, and do not do well when left on their own for long periods. This is a very important consideration for prospective owners who are away from home all day, and one which may be persuasive upon you to decide against having a dog in your present circumstances.

Regular food is, of course, necessary for any pet, and dogs are certainly no exception to the rule. In fact, many dogs appear to be always hungry and constantly on the look out for any extra scraps, even down to scavenging unrecognisable food debris from pavements.



It'll cost you!

Unfortunately, like most good things in life, it does cost a reasonable amount to keep a dog well and happy throughout its life. It is worth totting up the possible costs of regular vet visits for vaccinations and preventative treatment against parasites (worms, fleas and ticks), and treatment for possible illnesses or injuries etc. Then there are the food bills – with dog food it is a case of 'you get what you pay for' and advice from the vet is a good guide in terms of type and quantity of food to ensure your dog gets the right nutrients and doesn't become overweight.

Other costs are more 'one-offs', such as acquiring the dog, spaying or neutering, micro-chipping, bed, bowls, lead, car-harness and grooming brushes etc. Pet insurance and kennelling can be expensive should these be required.

Setting the tone

Just a short section here on things to do BEFORE you bring your new dog home – to help it settle in more easily:

Firstly, assuming you have already checked out that the character and type of dog will be suitable and safe for your family, find out as much as you can from its current carer about its daily needs, for example:

- 🐾 What sort of dog food does it eat and when?
- 🐾 What sort of bed is it used to?
- 🐾 Where does it normally sleep?
- 🐾 What is it like when out walking, both on and off the lead?
- 🐾 What sort of parasite preventative treatment is it receiving and when was it last administered?
- 🐾 Are there any particular needs that you need to be aware of?

Secondly, with the whole family, work out what the ground-rules for your dog will be and emphasize the importance of being consistent with these. Remember to consider where the dog will sleep, eat and eliminate; whether it will be allowed on furniture; and what areas are out of bounds to it.

Thirdly, you will need to ensure that you have plenty of spare time at home to help your pet settle in. A puppy will need you at home a great deal and an adult dog will certainly need you around to show it the house rules and make it feel welcome. It is best to be prepared for a few nights of disturbed sleep at first, and to plan your own activities accordingly.



“Get me out of here – I’m a new dog owner!”

This booklet is written to try to help prospective dog owners enter into the wonderful world of human/dog relationship with a greater sense of reality. Dogs are popular pets and when we see them quietly plodding alongside their owners, sitting obediently at crossroads and not barking at passing motorbikes, it is easy to think that that is what all dogs are like. It can come as a bit of a shock to discover that the creature on the end of your leash doesn't do 'sit', can't stand motorbikes, and will nearly pull you over every time it sees another dog (all of which can be managed with careful training.)

It's not uncommon to find yourself at the end of your tether a couple of weeks or months down the canine-owning road. This is the critical time when dogs can end up in the local shelters, with distraught owners crying "We can't cope!" Should you ever feel like this – PLEASE DO NOT PANIC. Remember, it can take a lot of time and effort to build a good relationship with your dog, and there will no doubt be some 'ups and downs' along the way.

The shelter staff or breeder from whom you acquired your dog may be good starting places for advice should you run into difficulties. Many problems can be resolved reasonably easily, but you might well benefit from the advice of your vet, local dog training classes, a behaviourist (if recommended by the vet), or simply 'boning up' by reading some practical and useful dog care books. The main thing is to get the help and advice you need as quickly as possible.



Man's best friend

Responsible dog carers take the trouble to find out what they need to know to keep their dog happy and healthy. By the fact of you reading this booklet, you are taking the first steps toward being a committed and caring dog owner. Dogs do make the most wonderful companions. They bring us great comfort and joy, and it is easy to see how they have earned the title of "man's best friend". This booklet is to help you become their best friend in return.

Boning up

There are some excellent books available to help you get to know more about caring for your dog, and new books are being published all the time, such as: 'Unlock your dog's potential – how to achieve a calm and happy canine' by Sarah Fisher (D&C). It's really worth investing in one or two really good books that you'll find interesting and easy to read.

The Environmental Animal Sanctuary and Education (EASE) is a registered charity (no. 1089160) which promotes aspects of the human/companion animal relationship.

Our services include pet bereavement support and education in animal welfare. For more information about our work, visit our website on

www.ease-animals.org.uk

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FOR ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

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Revised September 2010

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