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Your Guide to Choosing the Dog
That's Right for YOU

“How do I choose a dog?”

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It's one of the most common questions we get at Underdog. And though it may seem straightforward, **it's a question that's fairly complex to answer.** After all, we're talking about a decision that's going to impact your life — and that of your future four-legged friend — for years to come.

Training certainly plays a role in molding your pup into a good companion. But breed, genetics, and history are also significant factors. Though it may be tempting to spend hours scrolling online in search of the cutest pup you can find (we get it, we've been there), it's **important to do your research** so you can make a well-informed decision.

Our society often glamorizes certain types of dogs; however, **the “right dog” looks different for everyone.** We're all different. We have different lifestyles, needs, and capabilities.

*This guide is intended for people looking to add a **first dog** to their household. If you're adding a second or third dog to your home, it can serve as a great starting point. However, it's important to note there are many additional factors to consider, beyond the scope of what we cover in this guide.*

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For instance, an avid hiker might find Basset Hounds endearing but realize they're an impractical choice for their daily activities. Most people won't feel okay taking a large dog with a known bite history, but fortunately, some *are* capable and willing to give these dogs a second chance. And someone who thought they wanted a Samoyed might realize, upon further investigation, that a Beagle is a better choice for their lifestyle.

“Okay, great,”

Future dog owners might say.

“With all this individual variation, how does someone go about choosing a dog?”

We're so glad you asked. In fact, it's precisely why we created this guide. Here, we break down the key steps we recommend all prospective dog owners take as they select their new canine companion. And spoiler alert: This process involves a good bit of introspection.

Ready? Let's dive in. 



Determine If You're Ready For A Dog

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Dogs provide joy to millions of people every day. They are, after all, man's best friend (and woman's too, let's be real). Beyond enriching the lives of many, dogs are trained to herd livestock, fetch birds, and even save lives.

That said, a dog is an animal that is **not capable of fully caring for itself**. This means that, before choosing to get a dog, you must evaluate whether or not you're able to be your dog's caregiver. Completely. And ideally, for its entire lifespan.

Ask yourself these questions

- Are you ready for the commitment?
- How much availability do you have?
- How patient are you? Are you disciplined?
- Do you have financial wiggle room?
- Is the whole household on board?
- Do you have a plan for emergencies?
- What are your limitations?

*You might have noticed this first step is not titled "Determine if You **Want** to Get a Dog." There's a big difference between **wanting something** and **being ready for it**. By taking the time to fully consider all aspects of dog ownership, you're setting yourself — and your future dog — up for success.*



Do Your Research

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A quick example

A St. Bernard can be a good choice for those who don't mind shedding or drooling, and want a large, calm dog. They're gentle giants.

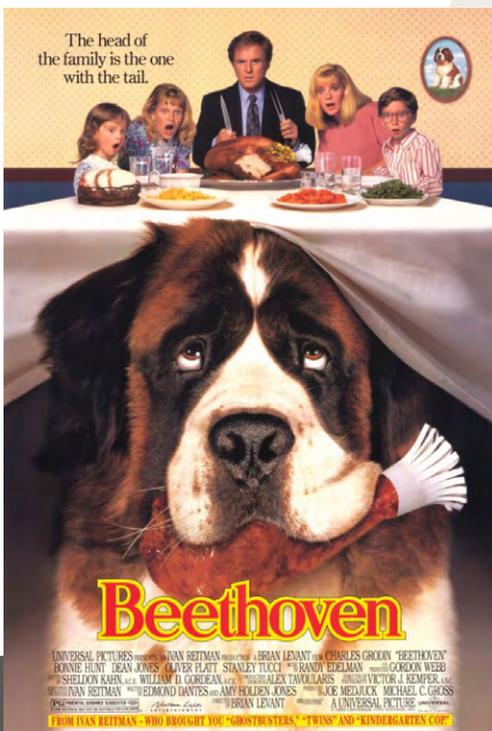
But people who need a hiking buddy? A St. Bernard doesn't make the list. These large, thick-coated animals can overheat easily. Their joints are susceptible to damage because of their size. And—god forbid—your pup gets injured in the backcountry? Let's just say we can't imagine packing out a 150-pound animal.

St. Bernards are possibly most well-known for the 90's-hit movie series, Beethoven.

The St. Bernard is of Swiss origin, first recorded in the late 1600's — but it was likely bred even earlier. St. Bernards are the result of crossing many [Molosser](#)-type breeds.

A modern-day St. Bernard can weigh up to 180 pounds!

[image credit](#)



[image credit](#)

The Nature vs. Nurture Debate

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Before we explore different breeds, we have to address a **misinformed** phrase that's a favorite among many dog enthusiasts:

“It’s all in how you raise them.”

It’s a saying that’s commonly used to combat hate towards dogs that are often perceived as more aggressive, such as pitbulls.*

Another way to capture this sentiment:
All dogs will behave similarly if put into a supportive, positive environment — no matter their breed.

This is a well-meaning, but untrue, concept.

There’s a reason administrative forces use Belgian Malinois for criminal apprehension. Fowl hunters often choose from the assortment of retrievers, pointers, and spaniels. Human shepherds take their pick of, well, dog shepherds.

You may think, “Well, I don’t chase criminals, hunt birds, or herd sheep—this doesn’t apply to me.” But it *will* apply to your dog. **Their breed purpose is embedded in their DNA.**

[image credit](#)



**STAFFORDSHIRE
BULL TERRIER**

[image credit](#)



**AMERICAN
PIT BULL TERRIER**

[image credit](#)



**AMERICAN
STAFFORDSHIRE TERRIER**

[image credit](#)



**AMERICAN
BULLDOG**

	STAFFORDSHIRE BULL TERRIER	AMERICAN PIT BULL TERRIER	AMERICAN STAFFORDSHIRE TERRIER	AMERICAN BULLDOG
Weight	24 – 38 pounds	30 – 60 pounds	40 – 70 pounds	60 – 100 pounds
Height	14 – 16 inches	17 – 20 inches	17 – 19 inches	20 – 25 inches
Lifespan	12– 14 years	8 – 15 years	12 – 16 years	10 – 12 years

*It should be noted that **“pitbulls” are not exactly a recognized breed in the United States.** “Pitbull” is a blanket term used to describe muscular, boxy-headed dogs. This usually includes Staffordshire Bull Terriers, American Staffordshire Terriers, American Bulldogs, and American Pit Bull Terriers. It may include several other breeds based on subjective appearance. These three breeds have similar ancestries — and certainly share characteristics — but are distinctly different breeds.*

The Nature vs. Nurture Debate

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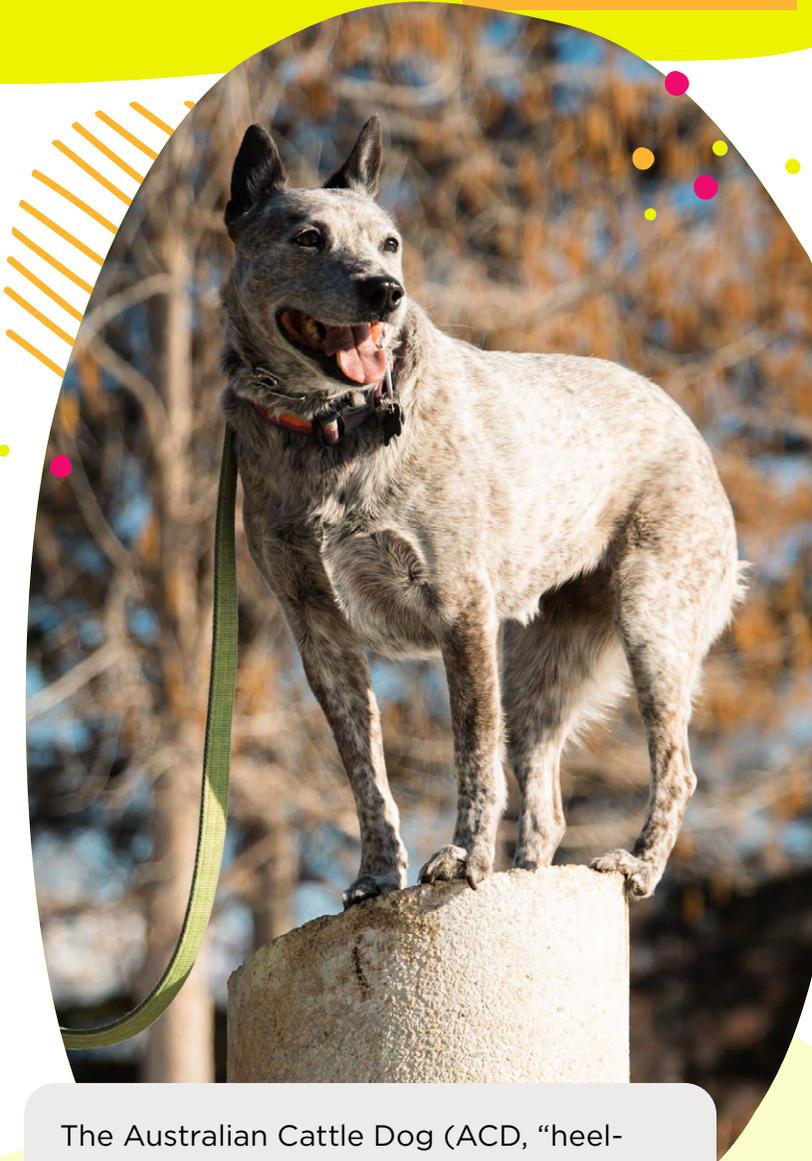
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Take, for instance, Australian Cattle Dogs (ACD). This breed was bred to herd cattle. Let's imagine a nice urban couple thinks the breed is cute (*red flag!*) and decides to purchase or adopt one. Their pup's new home environment (a small apartment in the city) doesn't give it the chance to chase cows. If it is not given a proper outlet, this dog will **quickly become miserable, making its new owners miserable in turn.** This could manifest as anxiety and/or general discontent: excessive barking, urinating inside, biting, shredding, or destruction. Both the owners and the dog could come to resent each other.

This doesn't mean an ACD strictly needs to herd in order to live a good life. Rather, an ACD needs a consistent outlet for its natural bravery and problem-solving skills. To meet these needs, our aforementioned couple could use things like "find it" games, chasing toys, dog puzzles, and other enrichment activities. Agility training could also be a good fit. Some ACDs even excel in detection. All that matters is that the dog's mind and spirit are fulfilled daily, in a way that aligns with its breed purpose.



[watch 'em
be wild](#)



The Australian Cattle Dog (ACD, "heeler," or "Cattle Dog") is a medium-sized herding breed known for its hard-headed personality.

Seriously — take a moment to consider the character traits a dog would need to successfully move an entire herd of animals, *each 40x its size*. Determination. Resourcefulness. Ferocity.

These traits (among others) are **required** to herd cattle, and as such have been reinforced in the breed for generations.

Do Some Breeds Bite More Than Others?

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A quick search of the phrase “dog breeds most likely to bite” brings up a perplexing array of results — many of which conflict with one another. Not to mention, **there are a wide variety of reasons a dog might bite,** including fear, aggression, hunger, or lack of proper mental and physical stimulation.

What we can say with certainty? **No dog should be allowed to freely bite.** All dogs should receive fair and consistent training to integrate peacefully into the human world. For future dog owners, it’s important to know that you might need to provide more time and engagement to high-needs breeds to ensure they don’t manage their boredom on their own terms — which could include biting.



The 411 On Biting

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As mentioned earlier, it is unclear if there are certain breeds that bite more frequently than others. Here's what we do know:

- There are about **4.5 million dog bites** reported in the United States every year
- About **1 in 5** of these require medical attention
- Most bites **happen at home** by a dog known to the victim
- **Children** are bit more commonly and more severely

It seems that most bites to kids are a result of a child **being left alone** with a dog (which, from a safety and training standpoint, **should never happen regardless of how “good” a dog is**).

Take this moment to accept the fact that **all dogs can bite.**

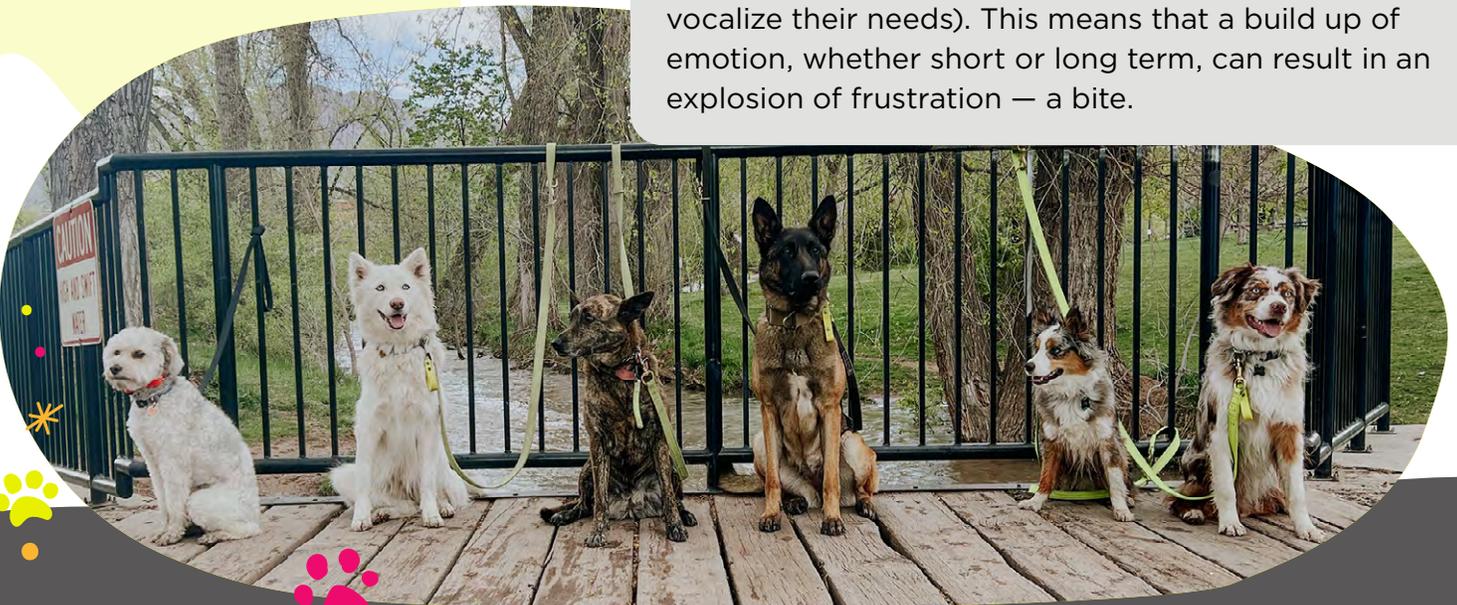


Beyond those reported, **we can also assume there are many dog bites that go unreported.** This could be because owners of breeds often viewed as more “aggressive” don’t want to perpetuate stereotypes about their dogs. It could also be because there’s “no way” your aunt-such-and-such’s sweet little Pomsky would ever bite (*How out of character! It’s never happened before, and I’m sure it will never happen again*).

Because many bites go unreported **it’s difficult to accurately measure**—much less, determine—**bite statistics** by breed.

Big *and* small. Aggressive *and* docile. Male *and* female. Young *and* old. Pointy-eared *and* floppy-eared *and everything in between*.

Remember: **dogs are animals that can’t vocalize their needs** (let’s be honest — most *people* can’t vocalize their needs). This means that a build up of emotion, whether short or long term, can result in an explosion of frustration — a bite.



The Big “No”s

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So far, we’ve covered the [nature vs. nurture](#) debate and [why your dog’s breed actually matters](#). Now, let’s go over some background info on **breeds that we recommend avoiding** or **approaching with extreme caution** — whether for behavioral or other reasons.

Risky Breeds

Some breeds are a **big “NO”** for almost any owner, like the Boerboel or Kangal. Most of these are rare and are bred for specific hunting or guarding purposes. This makes them very poor (not to mention, risky) house pets. Very, very rarely, some breeds are bred exclusively for dogfighting, like the Japanese Tosa. We hope this goes without saying, but this is also a HUGE no.

Fortunately, dogs like this aren’t bred frequently and are tough to find. But if you haven’t heard of a breed, make sure to do your research. If you’re still unsure, ask a knowledgeable dog trainer, breeder, or veterinarian.

The Boerbel, a beautiful giant guard dog breed, weighing up to 200 pounds! They’re **NOT** a good fit for 99% of households.

[image credit](#)



There are many additional breeds that are recommended only for experienced owners. This is covered more fully in the paid version of this ebook.

Brachycephalic Breeds

We’ll cut right to the chase: **We cannot, in good conscience, recommend brachycephalic breeds of any type.**

Brachycephalic is a Greek-derived word meaning “short-headed” and includes breeds people commonly refer to as “flat-faced.” This includes French Bulldogs, Pugs, Boston Terriers, Brussels Griffons, and English Bulldogs, among others.

If that list made you audibly gasp (What do you mean you don’t recommend Frenchies??? They’re so cute and it seems like everyone I know has one?!), stay with us for a sec. Hear us out.

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Brachycephalic Breeds CONTINUED

The short-snouted appearance (aka, brachycephaly) is a breed requirement for all of these dogs. [Research has shown](#) that Brachycephalic breeds, like French Bulldogs, often face **significant health conditions** as a [direct result](#) of the shape of their head, muzzle, and throat. These include:

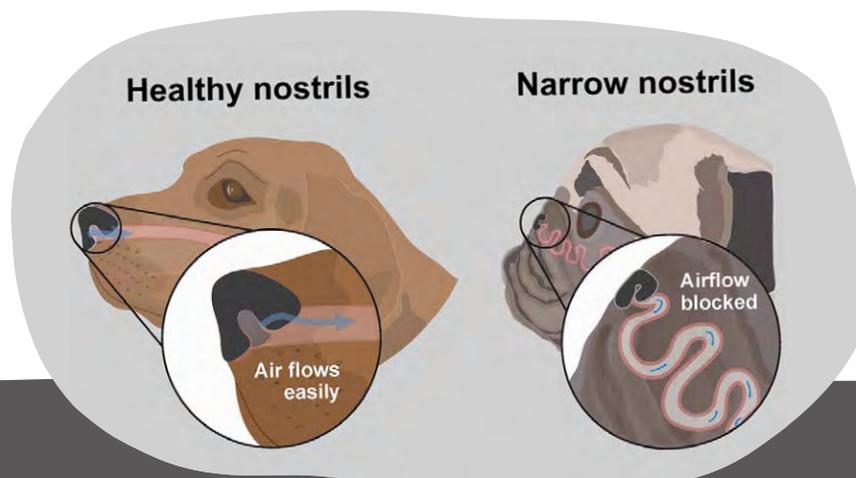
Brachycephalic Obstructive Airway Syndrome (BOAS):

a lifelong and often-progressive disorder that limits a dog’s ability to live a normal life. Symptoms include labored breathing, unprovoked coughing, sneezing, and snoring. Dogs with BOAS can’t cool down properly, which is extremely dangerous on hot days. Their inability to breathe causes the heart and lungs to work in overdrive, causing serious problems over time. The only treatment is surgery, which usually costs several thousand dollars.

Brachycephalic Ocular Syndrome (BOS):

due to the shortening of the skull, there isn’t room for the dog’s eyes to sit properly. The eyelids can’t close fully over the protruding eyeballs, leaving them dry and irritated. This can cause eye trauma, vision issues, and eye infections. In severe cases, dogs become blind or need their eye(s) removed.

Additional breed-related issues that are a direct result of generations of poor breeding



[image credit](#)

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Brachycephalic Breeds CONTINUED

Since their short-snouted appearance is both a breed requirement and the root cause of severe health issues, **there is no ethical way to breed brachycephalic dogs.** And unfortunately, as long as these dogs remain trendy (and demand for them remains high), they will continue to be bred.

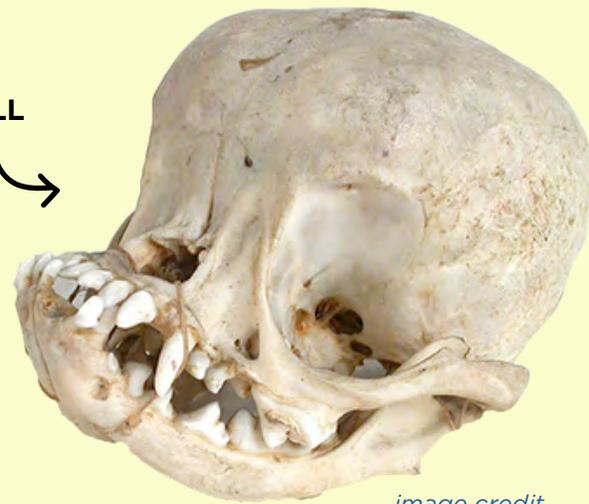
This is where you can help. By educating yourself on the health complications caused by brachycephaly and choosing not to purchase one of these breeds from a breeder, you can help put an end to the suffering caused by their continued breeding.

A quick caveat: It's a fact that many brachycephalic dogs still exist and have already been bred. These dogs deserve supportive and consistent homes. You might find a brachycephalic pup at an ethical rescue and, upon further research, determine it's a good fit for you. If you find yourself in such a situation, we recommend thoroughly researching the breed and possible health complications they might face so you can ensure you are prepared to support such a pup.

Health at a Glance

As a general rule, all exaggerated appearances indicate a higher risk of health issues. Examples include flat faces, extreme size (large or small), and very short limbs.

PUG SKULL



[image credit](#)

TERRIER SKULL



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Wolf Hybrids & Wolf Dogs

Ready for a sentence we never thought we'd write? In recent years, wolf hybrids have also risen in popularity and trendiness. Wolf hybrids. If the name itself didn't give you a good hint, we'll give it to you straight:

These animals are not good pets.

Dogs have been domesticated for [over 30,000 years](#). As such, dogs evolved *with* humans, meaning that many of their capabilities are aligned with human behaviors. Take, for instance, the fact that dogs have [micro-muscles in their eyebrows](#) that allow them to mirror human expressions, or that dogs can [follow human pointing](#) (a trait that even chimpanzees do not possess). Wolves, on the other hand? They're a whole different beast (literally).

Wolves are naturally fearful of humans. They keep their distance and almost always prefer to disengage with us. In the United States, there have been [fewer than 20](#) fatal wolf attacks **ever** recorded in history—they avoid humans at all costs.



TL;DR - Leave the wolves to the wild animal specialists. Let's stick to dogs.

image credit

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Wolf Hybrids & Wolf Dogs

Crossbreeding these two species creates unpredictable genetics.

Hybrids retain the wolf’s size and predatory nature but, like dogs, are not fearful of humans. This creates an unusual animal with wild tendencies and little-to-no fear (NOT a good mix). These animals can stalk kids and pets. They are highly territorial and can be aggressive around food, toys, or other possessions. Add in the fact that a wolf’s bite force is significantly larger than that of a domesticated dog? It’s a **BIG NO** from us.

Unfortunately, many of these characteristics don’t show until a wolfdog reaches physical maturity (when it is several years old).

This can cause some misleading (and misinformed) beliefs:

This particular wolfdog isn’t aggressive. *This* one can be trusted around kids and pets. *This* one doesn’t have issues. Until, surprise! One day this wolf hybrid reaches physical maturity, and its owners find themselves face-to-face with a rude (not to mention, dangerous) awakening.

[image credit](#)

If you still aren’t convinced of why wolfdogs are on our “HARD PASS” list, consider this: Many veterinarians, trainers, and dog sitters **refuse to care for wolf hybrids** because they are literally a different animal. These pet caregivers are qualified to care for dogs, which have different needs than wolves.



In addition to the items mentioned, wolfdogs and wolf hybrids are often surrendered or euthanized because of their **extremely destructive behaviors**. They can (and will) easily escape an 8’ fence by climbing over or digging under. Wolfdogs essentially need an 1,000 sq ft. outdoor kennel made of extremely thick wire. Also, say goodbye to anything that could be considered a toy, including couches, carpet, tables, dishes, kennels, blinds, pets — you name it.

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Designer Breeds (AKA, The Doodles)

Ah, designer breeds. Much like the aforementioned Frenchies, designer breeds are trendy, but not without their challenges (Are you seeing a pattern here?).

Before we get into why they can be problematic, there’s a question we have to address:

What exactly is a designer dog breed?

In short: a marketing ploy. The only difference between a “designer dog” and a mixed breed or mutt is that, with a designer breed, you (theoretically) know which two breeds are being mixed. Most often, it’s [insert any breed here] crossed with a poodle.

We want to be very clear here: **We’re NOT saying you should avoid mutts or mixed-breed dogs.** Many of these dogs are perfectly fine. What we are cautioning against are “designer breed” crosses, where shady business practices are all too common.



The first intentional poodle cross is credited to Wally Conron, who sought a hypoallergenic service dog. After years of attempting to retrofit breeds, Wally realized he needed [“a dog with the working ability of the Labrador and the coat of the poodle,”](#) and, thus, the Labradoodle was born.

Poodle mixes have since exploded in popularity.

Conron says it’s his [“biggest life’s regret”](#) and he [“hasn’t got a clue”](#) why people are still breeding them today.

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Designer Breeds (AKA, The Doodles) CONTINUED

Theoretically, with proper genetic testing, a poodle mix *could* be a stable and healthy animal. But this isn't what has happened. Irresponsible breeders have haphazardly slapped poodle genes into breeds of all types. Some common mixes are **Labradoodles** (*Lab x Poodle*), **Goldendoodles** (*Golden Retriever x Poodle*), and **Cockapoos** (*Cocker Spaniel x Poodle*).

These crosses have created massive controversy in the dog world. If you can tolerate some online arguing, you can find the full story with a quick internet search. It essentially boils down to one key idea: **Most designer breeders are in it for the money,** and they ignore critical elements like good, old-fashioned honesty.

Would ya look at that? More mud!



Reminder that ethical breeding is **NOT a profitable venture.**

The reason most designer breeds are half-poodle is simple: Poodles don't shed (much). This is considered desirable by many people, but they often don't consider the *undesirable* poodle traits.

For one, non-shedding dogs require a LOT of expensive and tedious grooming. Failing to groom these dogs can lead to [matted hair, pain, and skin infections](#). Behaviorally, Poodles can be **sensitive**. They're **particular** about people and environments. They **tend to struggle** with big life changes, like moving homes. Poodles **don't do well alone** for long stretches. This sensitivity can manifest in stubbornness, destruction, sulking, fear, barking, biting, and general anxiety.

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Designer Breeds (AKA, The Doodles) CONTINUED

Many people generating doodles are not breeding ethically. They fail to conduct proper health and temperament testing. They have little to no education on canine health. Though breeders will often offer DNA tests like Wisdom and Embark to prospective owners, **these do not count as proper health tests.**

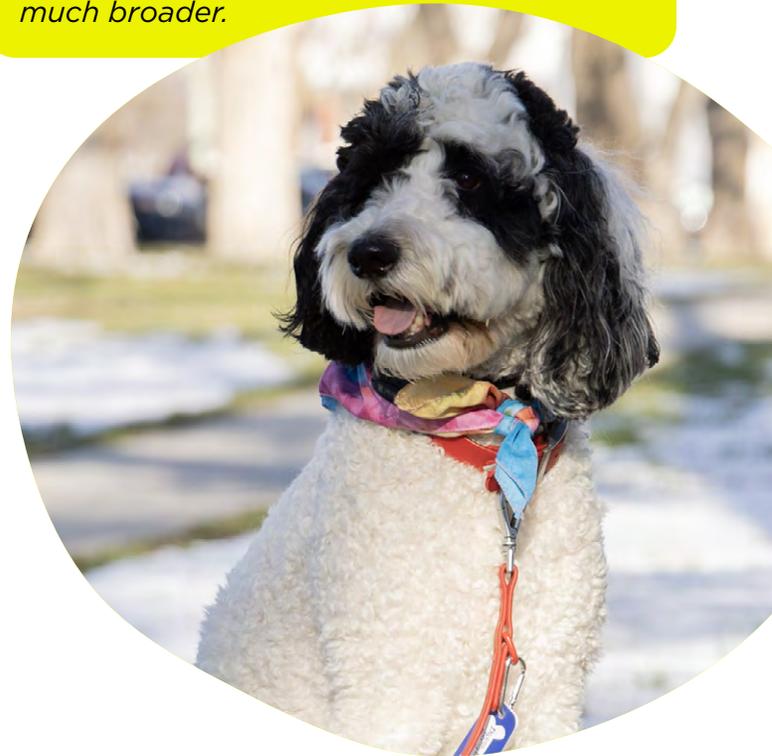
The result? Many designer breed dogs are behaviorally temperamental, face increased health risks, and need expensive maintenance — and are sold with false promises. If the only reason you’re considering a poodle mix is that you want a non-shedding breed, **there are other options to choose from that aren’t such a big gamble.** If you *do* want a doodle, there are many, many good crossbreed candidates available for adoption. By choosing them, you can ensure you aren’t supporting unethical breeding practices.

The quick and dirty is:

Most people generating doodles are not breeding ethically

Genetics are unpredictable.

*We tend to assume the best genes will always prevail when it comes to inheritance, but **that’s not how genetics work.** They’re random. We can’t pick and choose. Even if a breeder completes full genetic, OFA, and temperament testing on both parents, there is no guarantee the pups will be issue-free, even if they’re purebred. With crossbreeds, the spectrum of potential behaviors, traits, and appearances is much, much broader.*



STEP 2: DO YOUR RESEARCH

Let's Talk Breed Groups

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There is a fairly reliable correlation between a dog's needs and its breed group. Dog groups are organized by things dogs were originally bred to do.

The [AKC](#) defines seven groups:

Group Name	Description	Examples
Herding 	Bred to move livestock.	Border Collie German Shepherd Australian Cattle Dog
Working 	Bred to work with a balance of endurance and intelligence.	Doberman Pinscher Samoyed Mastiff
Terrier 	Bred to pursue and kill varmint.	Jack Russell Terrier Border Terrier Irish Terrier
Sporting 	Bred to help hunters in retrieving ground fowl (setters, pointers, spaniels) and waterfowl (retrievers).	Labrador Retriever German Shorthaired Pointer English Springer Spaniel
Hound 	Bred to track game, ranging from jackrabbits to mountain lions.	Bloodhound American Foxhound Basset Hound
Toy 	Bred for easy and devoted companionship.	Chihuahua Maltese Shih Tzu
Non-sporting 	Includes remaining breeds that don't fit the above categories.	Bichon Frise Chinese Shar-Pei Finnish Spitz

Herding, Working, and Terrier

groups tend to generate the **most demanding** pets. They were bred to work and require daily physical and mental stimulation.



Toy and Non-Sporting

are often the **more mild-mannered** groups, with more forgiveness and willingness to “play things by ear.”



Hounds and Sporting generally **fall somewhere in the middle.** They like working, but prefer breed-based games over extensive puzzles like the Herding, Working, and Terrier groups.



Of course, these are all generalizations. It's possible to find a calm herding dog—they definitely exist! But they're uncommon, and if you need a reliably mild-mannered pup, a Belgian Tervuren isn't the place to start.

Different Breeds, Different Needs

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The final piece of our research phase: **exploring the needs of different dog breeds.** Generally speaking, each breed will have different needs, based on what purpose it was originally bred for.

There's a reason this section isn't titled "Different Breeds, Different Energy Levels." **"Energy" is a subjective term** people use to describe dogs and breeds. People who want a hiking buddy may seek "high-energy" dogs. Depending how your sources define energy, you could end up with a variety of breeds. Pretty much any dog with a healthy build, between 30 and 70 pounds can do any basic hike, regardless of breed group—but they aren't all "high energy." If you just need a hiking buddy, but end up with a "high-energy" pup, **you might be in for more than you asked for.**

High energy can mean anything from "runs a lot" to "can solve complex puzzles." Dogs who run a lot (like Huskies) are fairly manageable as long as they get a few miles of daily movement. Dogs who can solve complex puzzles (like Border Collies) absolutely *need* 30 – 60 minutes of direct, interactive work *daily*. They learn systems quickly. You must outsmart them and progressively make tasks more difficult so they don't become bored. Bored dogs eat through couches and drywall.



Chaser the Border Collie (2003 – 2019):
The "[Smartest Dog In the World.](#)"

"Teaching her *concepts* was infinitely greater than teaching her... *behaviors* because once she learned a concept, **she was able to use her brain and start to learn by inference**, which is the way children learn... She had 30 balls and knew all of them by a proper noun and also by category. **You could ask her to find another ball, and she knew adjectives like bigger, smaller, faster, and slower.**"

— John Pilley (Chaser's owner)

Pilley and Chaser are responsible for significantly furthering canine cognitive science.

Learn More with the Full Version

Step 1: Determine if You're Ready for a Dog

Step 2: Do Your Research

- THE NATURE VS. NURTURE DEBATE
- DO SOME BREEDS BITE MORE THAN OTHERS?
- THE BIG NO'S
- LET'S TALK BREED GROUPS
- DIFFERENT BREEDS, DIFFERENT NEEDS

Step 3: Choosing a Breed

Step 4: Male vs. Female Dogs — Does It Matter?

Step 5: Decide on Puppy vs. Adult Dog

Step 5: Research Where You'll Get Your Dog. This Matters.

Resources

Path to dog ownership checklist

Choosing a breed worksheet

Questions for shelter

Questions for breeder

Puppy guide preview

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