

Five Mistakes Dog Owners (and Potential Owners) Make

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When I was preparing this piece, it was difficult to narrow down the five biggest mistakes I see dog owners make. Raising a dog properly is very much like raising a child. If left to their own devices, they will get into trouble. Children really are not a part time investment and neither is a dog. If you cannot be fully committed, maybe you should rethink having one. Do you know the average person will put more thought in to a car or clothing purchase than into a dog? Scary when you think of it. A car does not think, does not breathe, and does not have training needs. A car does not have moods or the ability to reproduce itself. A car needs basic maintenance and a safe driver. A dog needs far more. Here are the five biggest mistakes I see dog owners making – and believe me, these only scratch the surface!

1) Failure to research the desired dog. Nothing irks me more than having someone come up and say they got the dog because they liked how it looked and now they cannot handle it. A family recently got a Border Collie puppy for their small farm. However, they wanted a laid-back breed. This is not a Border Collie. A former manager of mine got a Bulldog puppy and he wanted a dog capable of jogging with him. This is not a Bulldog (English type Bulldog, not an American that is far more athletic). My own Hunter was given up because the family wanted a small dog. Well Hunter is a cross between an Australian Shepherd and a Newfoundland – neither are small breeds! Getting a dog based on what you see on TV or in the movies is irresponsible. What makes a breed excel in these fields can often make it a tough pet for the average dog owner. What about size? Can you physically handle the dog you want? A smaller, frail elderly person may be better suited with a smaller dog and not something like a Great Dane. Even a gentle bump from a giant breed can send an owner sprawling and a hip be broken.

2) Failure to research the source of the dog. Just because you know all you can about a breed or the breeds going into the cross you are looking at adopting does not mean your research is done. Dogs should be gotten from two places only: reputable breeder or a good rescue group. Pet stores and back yard breeders are the two worst places for a puppy. Rarely do good breeders advertise in the local papers. They place pups through word of mouth. When you go to look at a potential pet, you need to ask many questions including: health (and ask for proof of tests done if you are not looking for a rescue); temperament; pros and cons of the breed; why the person is breeding; etc. I had a client who researched the breed her family got. The breed should have suited them well. When she bought the puppy, she went to a person who bred less for companionship and more for hunting ability. The puppy is more than they can handle. She has a very strong work drive and needs to get out and use her talents. The puppy will not be happy being a house pet; she needs a job like tracking.

3) Failure to realize various commitments. The best home for a puppy is one where the pup is not home alone all day. On the other hand, if you do work full time, you are willing to take plenty of time before work, after work and weekends to go out and do activities with your dog to help burn off excess energy. Also, hire a midday walker for the pup or send pup to day care. Dogs are close to as much work as a child. You would not leave your five-year-old home alone without supervision. The less time spent with a dog, the worse off it is and the greater chance for behavioral issues starting. Dogs are also a lifetime commitment – anywhere from 8 – 15+ years. Dogs require financial commitment. The average dog owner can easily spend \$500/year on a dog: food, supplies, medical, training. Then what about emergencies? Can you afford to fix the dog if it is hit by a car and injuries not life threatening but still expensive to repair?

4) Failure to be consistent (owner is always changing the rules). This goes with both training and daily life. If Mom and Dad forbid the dog on furniture, but Little Timmy and Janie do, the dog will continue to get on the furniture. He will also become confused as he is being told different things. This leads to stress, anxiety and possibly acting out. If you constantly change commands during training when you want the dog to down and use Down, Lie Down, Lay, whatever as opposed to picking one command and using it, this greatly slows the learning of the dog and adds to confusion. Alternatively, teaching a puppy by paper training that it is OK to potty in the house and NOW you do not want him to potty inside, this greatly slows house training. Confusion and the subsequent building of anxiety does nothing to help the dog learn and can lead to issues later.

5) Failure to train and socialize. For safety, formal classes should not be started before a puppy has completed his third set of puppy boosters. In addition, leaving the yard before this time can be risky as well. Any place that dogs frequent can harbor diseases for months (like Parvo Virus) that the pup is not able to fight off yet. However, it is vital to begin training and socializing at home as soon as the pup comes into the home. Puppies can start leash training and learn basic cues like sit and down. They can be exposed to walking on different surfaces like boards, bubble wrap, wire mesh. They can be exposed to different sounds and smells and hats, uniforms, etc. Get creative and if your pup can encounter it outside the house, try to mimic it on your property! This will get you a jump on other puppies in class when the pup is old enough to start formal lesson. Even adult dogs needs to start training and socializing as soon as adopted or bought. Failing to do so ends up with a dog that is socially retarded and this can lead to big problems later on.