

Chapter 1

Are You Ready to Get a Dog?

A dog. The word may conjure up Lassie going to rescue Timmy yet again. Or Ol' Yeller, who served his family so faithfully. Or perhaps Pongo of *101 Dalmatians*, Benji, or some other dog superstar has caught your eye. Maybe you always wanted a dog, but your parents didn't let you have one. Or maybe you've grown up with dogs and are looking for another one. Maybe you have a family now and you want your family to enjoy a pet.

If you're interested in getting a dog, you're in good company. There are approximately 63 million dogs in the United States alone. About 45 million U.S. households have dogs. You can get a dog in almost any shape, size, or color imaginable (at least those found in nature), and the variety of dog breeds is staggering. If you want a purebred, you have 154 American Kennel Club (AKC) breeds, as well as more than 150 other breeds, to choose from, or you might opt for a one-of-a-kind mixed-breed dog.

Dogs offer companionship, protection, and, in some cases, services. Most people know about dogs who help visually impaired people, but there are also dogs who hear for those who are deaf and those who can help quadriplegics. Likewise, dogs work as sled dogs, tracking dogs, hunting dogs, herding dogs, search-and-rescue dogs, and a variety of other jobs for humans. No other domesticated animal is so versatile and so bonded to humans.

Whatever the reason, you want a dog. You're ready for one now.

Or are you?

What's Inside ...

- Learn whether owning a dog is a good choice for you and your family.
- Learn what time constraints a dog will put on your lifestyle.
- Learn the time and financial costs of dog ownership.
- Learn whether your living situation warrants owning a dog.

Responsible Pet Ownership

We hear a lot about “pet overpopulation” and unwanted pets. It’s been estimated that about five million pets are euthanized every year in the United States. The reasons are varied, but many dogs are given up because their former owners brought home pets without understanding the responsibilities of pet ownership. By picking up this book, you’ve taken the first step toward responsible pet ownership.

Owning a dog is a big responsibility, both in time and in cost. Every year millions of dogs make their way into shelters and rescues because people thought that they would like a dog but weren’t prepared for the responsibility of having one.

Even if you’re dead-set on getting a dog, don’t jump to chapter 2 and ignore my warnings. It’s important that you understand the responsibilities of pet ownership.

Time Commitments and Inconveniences of Owning a Dog

Dogs are pretty unique critters. They offer their owners companionship, love, and humor, but in return, dogs require time and can be inconvenient. In most cases, dogs are dependent on their owners for attention (no, they don’t amuse themselves—or if they do, it’s usually with something you don’t want them to amuse themselves with), and they require training, exercise, and attention every day.

Every day? Yes. *Every* day.

Dogs are pack animals, meaning that they require companionship from their pack. That means you. So owning a dog involves a commitment in a relationship.

Owning a dog is a ten- to fifteen-year commitment to that relationship. That means you have to be there to let her out to relieve herself at least every four hours as a puppy and every nine hours as an adult. You have to feed her two (or three, if a puppy) times a day. You have to provide fresh water. And you have to train and exercise her.

If you get a dog or puppy, she’s going to be dependent on you for attention. A lot of attention. Depending on the type of dog you have, you may have a dog who clings to you like Velcro. (In fact, Shadow is a very popular name for dogs.) One person described certain breeds by saying, “You’ll never go to the bathroom alone again.” That sums up many dog breeds. If you don’t want a dog hounding you at every step (pun intended), don’t get a dog. Granted, there *are* independent-minded critters out there, such as some of the hounds and dogs that come from the northern breeds, including Alaskan Malamutes, Siberian Huskies, and Samoyeds.

So, with a dog, you have an animal who clings to you and who is looking for your guidance and interaction. But dogs also get into a tremendous amount of trouble when they're not looking for your attention. The roast on the counter is enticing; so is the garbage you put in the pail just under the counter. The chair legs are yummy. You have to spend time watching to make sure your new dog or puppy isn't getting into things she shouldn't. This takes away from the time you have for other things.

You're going to have to consider your dog instead of going out to dinner with your coworkers right after work or otherwise spending a long day away from home. Your dog will need to be let out, played with, exercised, and fed. And at least for a while after you bring her home, you're going to need to spend time watching your dog to make sure she doesn't get into trouble.

How long do you need to spend training and exercising your dog? Well, that depends on the dog, how old she is, what breed she is, and other factors. If you live in an apartment, you can expect that you're going to have to take your dog outside a minimum of four to five times a day to eliminate (and take her on one long walk of twenty minutes or more). If you have a fenced-in backyard, you'll have to let your dog out several times each day, and you're going to have to take her for at least one long walk every day or at least two or three times a week, depending on the breed.

Think about your current lifestyle. Taking off for a spontaneous weekend at the beach is out of the question if you can't bring your dog with you or you don't have a pet sitter or boarding kennel lined up. You must come home every day to care for your dog. You must walk her daily (or at least several times a week). Training is a must—dogs (especially puppies) don't come housetrained, and basic commands don't come easily to all dogs.

Training takes time. You'll need to start training classes, whether your dog is a puppy or an adult. If you're getting a puppy, consider taking five or six hour-long puppy kindergarten classes and then hour-long weekly obedience classes for eight to twelve weeks. An adult dog will only need the obedience course. During the obedience course and afterward, you need to work at home on training your dog. These sessions need to last ten to twenty minutes a day to keep her training fresh.

If you get a puppy (or an adult dog who isn't housetrained), you can count on spending some time housetraining her. If your dog is a puppy, it may take some time to housebreak her—from two or three months all the way up to one year. Some puppies catch on fast; others do not. Housetraining an older dog is easier, as most older dogs usually have some experience with housetraining already. If you stick with a schedule and crate your dog when you can't watch her, a few times of teaching her to eliminate outside is usually all that's needed.

Grooming takes time. Most dogs require some sort of grooming, whether it's combing and brushing or clipping, once a week. If you're doing it yourself, plan on taking an hour or so each week for grooming. If you're not planning on doing it yourself, consider the cost in having a groomer do it for you.



If you have small children and are planning on getting a dog, think of the dog as adding one more small child to the mix. Only this child doesn't understand English and certainly doesn't wear diapers. Most new parents have their hands full with a child. A new puppy or dog usually is too much on top of all that.



Dogs will do the darnedest things to waylay your best plans. Plan on going to a big interview for a new job, and your dog will have chewed your \$300 shoes. Need to get a good night's sleep for tomorrow's big presentation? Your dog will be up all night, puking up something that she ate the day before. What about that special holiday dinner? If you're not careful, your dog will snatch the roast off the counter (and, again, you can expect that she's going to be up all night puking). To fix all this takes time. Whether you're washing off the roast after grabbing it from your dog, going shopping for another pair of shoes, or taking the time to prevent these problems from happening in the first place, you're looking at a fair amount of time. Early on as a dog owner, I came home from a trip to find that my dog sitter had let my dogs run loose, and they had trashed the entire house. It took nearly a whole day to clean up.

Dog owners have to have a sense of humor when it comes to dog ownership and time constraints. If you're the type of person who can never find enough time in a day, don't own a dog. If you travel a lot, don't own a dog. If you're never home except to go to sleep, don't own a dog. And if you don't have a sense of humor, consider a very serious breed that is easily trained.

How much time will having a dog take? Again, that depends on the age, breed, and activity level of the dog. Between care, attention, exercise, playtime, and snuggling on the sofa, for puppies and young dogs, you can expect to spend about four to six hours each day; for older dogs, expect to spend three to four hours each day. Arguably, you can spend less, but then why bother owning a dog? Of course, this time can be split up between different family members, but someone must oversee the care to make sure that the dog is being properly cared for.

Financial Commitments of Dog Ownership

There is no such thing as a free dog. Nor does the cost of a dog stop at her purchase or adoption price. All dogs require adequate food, supplies, and veterinary care. Depending on the size of your dog, she may eat a little or quite a bit. Expect to buy a twenty-pound bag of premium food for a small dog and a forty-pound bag of premium food for a large dog once a month, plus canned meat and treats.

Your puppy will need a series of four to six vaccinations (usually a distemper-parvovirus combo and rabies). She'll need to be dewormed, tested for heartworm, and given heartworm-preventive medication. And if she's not already spayed or neutered, your dog will have to be spayed or neutered before the age of 6 months.

How Much Does a Dog Cost?

The cost of a dog doesn't end at her purchase or adoption price. If you decide to buy a puppy, you can expect certain costs the first year. The following is a list of potential costs you might face the first year:

Item	Cost	Total
Veterinary Care		
Distemper-parvo combo vaccination	\$10–\$50 each	\$40–\$200 (four times)
Rabies vaccination	\$10–\$30 each	\$10–\$30
Lyme disease vaccination	\$30–\$75 each	\$60–\$150 (two times)
Bordetella vaccination	\$20–\$40 each	\$40–\$80 (two times)
Giardia vaccination	\$30–\$75 each	\$60–\$150 (two times)
Office visit	\$10–\$30 each	\$40–\$120 (four times)
Spay/neuter	\$25–\$200	\$20–\$200
Deworming	\$20–\$50 each	\$40–\$100 (two times)
Heartworm test	\$10–\$50 each	\$10–\$50
Heartworm medicine	\$4–\$8 per dose	\$50–\$100
Supplies		
Crate	\$20–\$200 each	\$20–\$200
Bowls	\$5–\$10 each	\$10–\$20
Food	\$10–\$50 per month	\$120–\$600
Treats	\$1–\$5 per week	\$52–\$260
Toys	\$3–\$15 each	\$9–\$45
Grooming supplies	\$20–\$50	\$20–\$50
Collars, leashes, etc.	\$10–\$30	\$30–\$90
Miscellaneous supplies (bedding, etc.)	\$10–\$100	\$10–\$100
Services		
Grooming	\$25–\$75 per visit	\$300–\$900
Boarding	\$10–\$40 per day	\$140–\$480
Training	\$80–\$300 per 8-week class	\$160–\$600
Yard cleanup	\$25–\$50	\$350–\$600

Most puppies are expensive for the first year of life because of the required vaccinations, supplies, and veterinary checkups. (If you get an adult dog, you can still expect to have increased costs the first year, although they won't likely be as high as those for a puppy.) The cost usually decreases or remains steady during the dog's adult life (assuming no serious injury or illness) and then rises again as the dog passes 7 years of age and becomes a senior citizen. Problems such as cancer, arthritis, and other age-related diseases may crop up after that time.

But there are other costs to owning a dog, too. Most municipalities require that you license your dog. Some insurance companies raise homeowner insurance rates if you own a dog of a certain breed. It's a good idea to go through professional training sessions with your dog, so the dog learns basic manners and obedience commands. If you're not the type who will groom your dog yourself, you can expect to pay groomers' bills, too. Other costs can include treats, toys, crates, car seat belts, beds, and cleaners and cleaning appliances.

Environmental Requirements of Owning a Dog

So far, I've talked about the time and monetary requirements of owning a dog. Another requirement has to do with you and your lifestyle. Dogs are very adaptable creatures, but there are situations that just aren't conducive to owning a dog.

First, your dog must be safe and secure. That means you can't let your dog run loose in the neighborhood, whether you're in the country with "room to roam" or in the city. If you aren't planning on taking your dog for walks several times a day, you need a kennel run or a fenced-in yard where your dog can relieve herself and get some exercise.

If you rent, keep in mind that not all places are "dog friendly." Talk with your landlord about bringing in a dog.

Dogs are social creatures and want to be with their owners. If you're planning on having an "outdoor only" pet, think again. Leaving a dog outside all the time with no interaction is not fair to the dog.

Room to Roam?

Many people have the notion that dogs need room to run around. The problem with this thinking is that dogs can get into a lot of trouble running around free, whether in the country or in the city. A game warden or rancher can usually shoot a dog legally if she's caught harassing either wildlife or livestock. A hunter or trapper may accidentally hurt or kill a dog. A dog who runs loose risks being prey to coyotes and other predators, even in cities. Dogs aren't savvy about cars, and many are hit by them. And, of course, dogs can get into trouble with porcupines, snakes, skunks, trash cans, and rotting carcasses. When your dog is outside, she should be on leash or in a fenced area.



Certain breeds of dogs can do well in an apartment, provided that the owner is committed to exercising the dog throughout the day. As I said earlier, a dog requires the chance to relieve herself at least every nine hours (four hours, for a puppy).

If you have kids, you may be thinking that getting a dog is a good way to teach your children about responsibilities. This is fine; however, an adult in your household must be responsible for the dog. While children can help with the daily tasks, dog ownership requires a responsible adult to oversee the dog's care. You really can't expect a young child to be responsible for a living, sentient creature. You can give children tasks to do (and follow up on them) as a responsibility, but most children can't care for a dog properly.

Whether your child can care for a dog depends largely on the maturity of the child. I've known some very smart and responsible 12-year-olds whom I would think could care for a dog *with parental supervision*, and I've known teenagers I wouldn't trust caring for a houseplant. If you get a dog "for the kids," be aware that if your kids can't properly care for the dog, you've added a burden on yourself.

Am I Ready for a Dog? Questions to Ask Yourself

Consider the following questions when getting ready to adopt or purchase a dog or puppy:

A dog is a ten- to fifteen-year commitment. Are you willing to rearrange your life for ten to fifteen years to care for a dog?

How long will the dog be alone during the day? (You should leave a puppy alone for no more than four hours at a time and an adult dog for no more than nine hours.)

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Can you be home at appropriate times every day or make arrangements so that your dog can eat, drink, exercise, and relieve herself?

If you live in an apartment, does your landlord allow dogs?

If you live in an apartment, are you willing to take your dog for brief walks three to four times every day and for one long walk (over twenty minutes) every day?

Do you have a fenced-in backyard suitable for the type of dog you want to get? (Small to medium dogs require a four-foot fence; medium to large dogs require a six-foot fence.) Are there no holes, and can you make it dig-proof and climb-proof?

Does your homeowners' association allow you to fence in your backyard or have a kennel run?

Which adult will be responsible for the care of the dog? (Children can't be expected to take responsibility for a dog. A dog must be the responsibility of an adult in the household.)

Are you willing to clean up after accidents and dog vomit? (Puppies have accidents, and even adult dogs may vomit from time to time.)

How would you feel if your puppy chewed up something important or valuable? Puppies and adult dogs may chew inappropriate items.

Are you willing to housetrain your dog using a crate?

Are you willing to groom your dog as required? Some breeds and mixes require more grooming than others do, but all dogs need a good brushing at least once a week. Dogs with double coats shed profusely. Some dogs need periodic clipping.

Can you spend time training your dog ten to fifteen minutes every day so she understands your house rules and is enjoyable and fun to be around?

Can you spend an hour a week for six to eight weeks to socialize your puppy?

Can you spend an hour a week for ten weeks to train your dog properly?

Are you willing to pick up after your dog? Many cities have ordinances requiring that dog owners clean up after their dogs defecate. Even in cities that don't have such ordinances, picking up after your dog is a good, neighborly habit to be in.

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How do you feel about dog hair on everything and in everything, including food? (Yes, dog hair goes everywhere.)

How do you feel about muddy footprints on your clean clothes, or clothing that's been chewed?

Is anyone in your family allergic to dogs? If so, you might want to reconsider getting a dog. Who is allergic? Do you have an allergist who is willing to work with you on having a dog?

Does everyone in your family want a dog? Everyone must agree on wanting a dog.

Are you willing to exercise your dog every day? Activity levels of dogs differ considerably. A dog from a working breed is going to have a much different activity level than, say, a toy breed.

There is no such thing as a free or low-cost dog. You must buy dog food, bowls, dog beds, dog toys, and grooming items. You must pay for routine veterinary care and other care when the medical need arises. Can you pay for these items?

What will you do with your dog in a family emergency? Who can take care of her?

Do you have enough money (or credit) to pay for a veterinary emergency? These can run several thousands of dollars. Could you afford pet insurance?

If you've answered these questions positively, you're ready to consider owning a dog.

Why You *Should* Get a Dog

Now that I've sounded terribly discouraging, the truth is that having a dog is a wonderful thing. The problem is that many dog owners aren't prepared for all the inconveniences associated with having a dog. If you know about all these things, then you probably have a good idea why you want a dog and why you should get a dog.

Dogs provide companionship and, to a certain extent, security. You're never truly alone when your dog is with you. Dogs are great for people who live alone, providing both friendship and security. Most dogs will alert you to unusual things or people coming around. In many cases, just the sight or sound of a dog thwarts many people bent on doing harm. Even a small dog can be a deterrent.

According to studies, dogs are great for your health, too. Many studies suggest that pet owners live longer than those who do not have pets. Something about pets tends to make us healthier. Maybe it's the interaction or the need to take the dog for a walk. (Walking is great exercise for your dog and for you, too!) Your dog is likely to get you off the couch and outside a bit more for at least a walk or a game of fetch.

What about that unconditional love you hear about? Despite some cynics, many dog experts agree that dogs do love us. Your dog will love you for who you are, even when it feels like the rest of the world is against you. When you're feeling down, your dog will be happy to cheer you up. Dogs do goofy things and make you laugh. Even if your date has dumped you, your dog will watch that sappy romantic comedy and will be happy to share the ice cream and pizza you bought for dinner.



Many dogs are good with kids if both the kids and the dogs are properly trained and socialized. Having a dog is a great way to get kids away from the computer or video games and go outside to have fun. Having a dog is a great way to get your kids exercise, too (someone has to walk and play with the dog).

But dogs are more than just companions. Don't know how to meet other people? Get a dog. Dog lovers abound, and when you're looking to meet people, your ambassador is at the end of the leash. Get involved in various canine activities—even walks around your neighborhood—and you will meet people and make friends.

Dogs are great companions for those who like the outdoors, too. Plenty of dogs are ready to go on hikes, ride in a boat, and go swimming, jogging, biking, and plenty of other wonderful activities.

Whatever your own reasons for getting a dog, you should weigh them carefully against the responsibility of dog ownership.

What You Now Know . . .

- 🦷 Dogs require a commitment of lots of your time. You should reconsider getting a dog if you have very young children, are constantly busy, are constantly traveling, or are unable to care for a dog or make the time commitment necessary.
- 🦷 You need to be prepared for all the expenses that come along with dog ownership.
- 🦷 You must provide a safe and secure environment for your dog.
- 🦷 Having a dog provides a world of great benefits, from companionship to great fun!