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## **So, You Think You Want A Dog?**

A 20-Point “Think System” by Karen Palmer

Dogs have enriched our lives for thousands of years, serving as fellow workers, guides, rescuers, and companions. For those who have been lucky enough to share a home with one (or more), it is usually difficult to even consider living in a home without them. However, canine ownership is a big responsibility and should not be taken lightly. Anyone considering adopting or purchasing a new canine member into their home should take some time to reflect on their personal situation before making a final decision.

This 20-point “Think System” has been developed to aid such a person, whether purchasing a purebred puppy or adopting a shelter dog, whether adding a dog to an already large family “pack”, or adopting a puppy for the very first time. Please read and consider each point thoroughly before making a final decision concerning your adoption or purchase.

Many of the below ideas have also been borrowed from two books highly recommended: The AKC Dog Care and Training book (2002), \$16.99, and The Humane Society of the United States Guide to Dog Care: Everything You Need to Know to Keep Your Dog Healthy and Happy (1998), \$16.95. Both books are well worth the money! If needed, please contact Karen Palmer for advice on other reading materials.

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20. **Think Why:** This *must* be a decision that everyone in the household agrees on. Be sure that you understand the reason *why* you are considering acquiring a new member to your family. You may each have a different reason, but they should not conflict. If one person has doubts or concerns, please consider these *before* bringing in a dog. If just one person and the dog will not get along, it may be wise to avoid conflict by not adopting until those concerns are resolved.

19. **Think Size:** When considering the type of dog you want to find, consider where you live (apartment, house, location, etc). Some large dogs do not require much exercise, and some small dogs will. Think about how much exercise you would really be able to provide yourself, and how/ where this exercise is most likely to take place. Then **do your research** into this aspect of the breeds you are interested in. Do you travel much? Do you have a vehicle that can easily transport a large dog? Do you have children? Some breeds, large or small, do better with kids. Large dogs may knock children over, but a smaller dog may be easier for a child to handle. Other large dogs are usually gentle with kids, while some small dogs cannot tolerate the rough handling children often subject them to. Remember that all breeds start out small, but some get much larger!

18. **Purpose of Type/ Breed:** What was this dog bred for? **Do your research.** Dogs of different types have different temperaments. Dogs from working backgrounds can be very different than dogs whose ancestors were pampered while raised in the laps of royalty. Even mixed breeds will often reflect the temperaments of their ancestors. Some breeds, especially from working backgrounds (examples include hounds, herders, and terriers) will require more training and exercise to be happy (and to keep their owners sane). Some are very independent and difficult to train for obedience, and these can be especially difficult for an inexperienced owner. Think about what the dog was bred for and what *you want the dog to do* (see also # 14).

17. **Think Coat Care:** Dogs vary greatly in their grooming requirements. The dogs in conformation shows usually look *very* different from most “purebred” pets. Obviously, a Poodle, Cocker Spaniel, or an English Sheepdog will require more coat care than a Dalmatian or Beagle. But all dogs require some level of grooming, and some of these requirements can be somewhat expensive. Be aware of what is required of the breeds you are

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interested in, and be ready to keep up with it in your time and finances. Also, remember that some breeds have long ears, wrinkles, or other inherited characteristics that often require more persistent care, or even medical assistance.

16. **Think Training:** *This is one very important aspect of dog ownership that must not be overlooked before you get a dog.* The majority of dogs that end up needing new homes are in that position due to a lack of training (not the dog's fault, but the owner's). It takes time, dedication, consistency, and involvement from everyone in the household to properly train a dog. *If training is neglected, you are very likely to have some problems!* You also should be aware that especially for the inexperienced owner, professional help in the form of obedience classes, and sometimes in-home personal assistance, is invaluable in creating a happy, healthy relationship between you and your dog. So remember that there will be a time factor involved in this category, and you should have some money set aside for obedience classes. (If you are unwilling to provide proper training care for a dog, you should seriously reconsider your interests in acquiring one!)

15. **Think Cost:** Think veterinary bills every year, spay/ neutering, teeth cleaning, emergency care, boarding if necessary, pet insurance (a new but possibly worth-while investment). Think food (good quality, of course), basics like collar and leash, bowls, toys, treats, grooming and training tools. Think fencing, grooming, and crating costs. **Do your research.** Sit down with your carefully prepared, expected cost list and see how it factors into your budget. This could be a very important reality check. You wouldn't adopt a child without doing the same thing, so take some time for this step-- a dog would be another member of your family. They are a *big* financial investment!

14. **Think Use:** See #18, and take some time to consider how you would use the talents your dog has been bred for. Are you interested in showing a purebred dog? **Do your research** if this is an interest to you. You won't want to get just any dog. Do you want a dog to guard your home and children? You will want an even-tempered dog that will be attached to your family, but you don't want your friends or family to have to fear for their safety. **Do your research** if this is your interest, and talk to breeders *before you make a decision.* A "guard dog" is a *highly-trained* dog, and is not for just any owner! Do you want a hunting dog? Or would you like a companion to compete with in obedience, tracking, agility, etc.? Would you be interested in providing petting therapy for others? These are just a few aspects to consider.

13. **Think Source:** This is a more important aspect than most people realize. No matter what you do, **please do not get a dog from a pet store!** Experienced and/ or responsible breeders do not take their puppies to pet stores. Most puppies that end up in stores are from places often referred to as "backyard breeders" or "puppy mills". Both may have "registration papers" of some sort. However, these puppies are bred for profit, and not for the benefit of the dogs or their new owners. These dogs *often* have genetic health and/ or behavior problems, and these may not show up until later in life. They also are not bred with temperament in mind, so you may have a real "time bomb" on your hands. Puppy mills are places where dogs are kept in crowded, filthy quarters, and bred repeatedly for profit. The dogs are often of ill health and have no socialization or exercise. The pet store situation does nothing to help this, and puppies are usually taken away too early and not cared for properly. Any way you look at it, pet stores are *the worst* places to get a dog. Turn away from that pathetic puppy face and let the store owner and all your friends know how disturbed you are by its presence. This is the best way to prevent other puppies from ending up in a similar situation.

**Breeders:** In contrast, the *best* place to get a dog, especially if you're new to this, is from a knowledgeable, experienced breeder. **Do your research.** (This should sound familiar by now.) When you think you have it narrowed down to one or two breeds, contact some experienced breeders of that breed. Have lots of questions ready-- about their experience, the health, training, and history of their dogs, whether you can see their dogs, and ask about their dogs' temperament and character. Ask if you can get some references from them to contact about their past history-- their veterinarian and people who have received their puppies in the past, for example. Their dogs may differ from another breeder's in many ways, regardless of their "pure" breeding (for example, dogs of the same breed may differ greatly in structure and temperament if one is from a long line of German dogs, and the other is American-bred, or if some are bred for conformation shows versus for working use).

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They should also be ready to ask *you* questions; be wary if they do not. Careful breeders want to know where their dogs are going because they care about the dogs and their own reputation. They should also be ready to take the dog back at any point in the future if there are any problems. If they do, they may have adult dogs available for adoption. If a breeder should attempt to dissuade you from acquiring one of their dogs and suggests another breed, do not be offended, but seriously consider their recommendations. They know their breed better than most, and it is possible that they may want you to reconsider that breed. Listen to their advice and then **do more research**. When you are ready to take home a dog, get a firm contract in writing, and understand it completely to avoid any future problems.

**Newspaper Advertisements:** Avoid dogs from newspaper classifieds-- these are often the “backyard breeders” spoken of earlier. These dogs may come with poor histories. The owners may be people who are not very knowledgeable, but consider themselves to be, and simply bred their dog with another for fun or profit. They do not necessarily have the interests of the breed, the dogs, or future owners in their interest. If you do consider one of these dogs, **do your research**. Find out why a particular dog is for sale, or for free. If they are breeders, ask about their experience, the puppy’s “line” (know more about a puppy than just its parents’ histories), see *both* parents, and be aware of the cleanliness of the dogs’ living environment, their health and grooming, level of socialization, and the dogs’ temperament, etc. Ask the breeder *why* they have chosen this breed, and *why* they have chosen to breed these particular two together. Their answer should be far more than, “they look good together”, or “they both have good temperaments”. Remember, “registered papers” only tell you that the names of previous generations are listed on paper! They do not necessarily make a dog worth more or prove reliability of health or temperament.

**Animal Shelters:** Shelters are sought out by caring individuals who want to “rescue” a dog, and also by people who want to adopt economically. Hopefully your concern is for the dog and your family. If your finances make this your number one choice, you should perhaps reconsider the decision to get the dog (see #6). Also, some shelters charge about as much for adoptions as others charge for “purebred” dogs in the newspaper! Shelters can have extensive histories of some dogs; not all are strays or dogs with drastic behavioral problems. Before you go to a shelter to even look, have a list of requirements and interests that you have for your dog. Talk to personnel there before you see dogs, and consider their advice. Keep an open mind, but not too open; don’t change your list to suit a dog you seem fond of, knowing there could be problems. “Your” dog may not be there on your first visit, but that’s okay. There are always other dogs available, and it may be well worth the wait to find a more appropriate companion. If you are inexperienced, you may want a puppy to raise rather than an older dog known to have a behavioral problem, or you may consider an older dog with a good history. A puppy may be difficult if you are not sure your family is ready for that level of commitment. Again, listen to the advice of professional trainers, groomers, breeders, veterinarians, etc. *before* you go, so you’ll know what to look for. Of course, you can also seek assistance in your tour of the shelter by having a trainer come with you. An experienced and objective eye can help with temperament testing and help find a match that suits you and your family. **Karen Palmer is available by appointment to help you with a shelter search.**

**Rescue Groups:** Rescue groups are also good places to get matched with a good dog. Some take in only dogs of a certain breed, while others limit themselves to dogs of a certain size or age, and others take in any dogs. Feel free to ask questions of any group, and be prepared to answer a number of them yourself. Most rescue groups charge a minimal fee, which covers spaying/ neutering, other veterinary costs, and other basic needs. Many are organized by a group of individuals who serve as foster homes. They are responsible for house training or handling other problems that may exist, as well as getting to know the dog’s particular temperament. As such, they are wonderful sources to get advice and make an appropriate match. They also often encourage prospective adopters to foster prior to making an official decision. This is an excellent idea for someone who may have any doubts or concerns.

12. **Think Long-Term:** This will be a new member of your family! You wouldn’t put a child up for adoption because you move, nor would you give them up if they had “housebreaking” or other behavioral problems. You, and all other members of the household, should be dedicated and *absolutely* committed to caring for this dog for its lifetime. It is not fair to the dog or yourself or your family if you don’t think you are ready for that type of

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commitment. Take your time if you are not sure. Many dogs are given up for frivolous, sometimes ridiculous reasons, and you don't want to be one of those people who abandon their pets at the first sign of trouble.

11. **Think Relationship:** Will you be master/ subject, owner/ property, parent /child, buddy/ buddy, partner/ partner, and leader/ follower? You should be ready to be all of these things. A dog is not meant to be a mere decoration, nor should a dog be left in the backyard, expected to be a "guard" and nothing more. Dogs are pack animals, and they strive to belong to a social family. You also want a dog that will match your personality. Again, here's where research into the type or breed will come in handy. Matching a dog's temperament with your own personality is an important aspect of creating a positive relationship. For example, a timid person should not get a dog with a dominant personality because the dog will take charge in this situation, and an aggression problem is likely to result (some types, such as independent working breeds, many terriers, and even some toy breeds are more likely to have this type of temperament). **Do your research.** Match the dog's likely temperament with your personality. There are many dog care books out there with guides to help you estimate a puppy or adult dog's future or present temperament.

10. **Think Responsibility:** You must remember that a dog is not *just* a dog-- it is a legal, financial, ethical, and social responsibility. You and your dog will affect other people as well. As a dog owner, you are held to higher social and legal standards than others.

9. **Think Time:** Think time to socialize your dog, exercise his mind and body, care for his basic needs, train him, and spend quality time with him. (See also #'s 17, 16, 12 and 11.) Are you prepared for the special time requirements of a puppy or a senior dog? Can your work schedule allow for the needs of a dog? Remember that a puppy or adult dog should never be crated for more than four hours at a time, but they may be left for longer periods if not crated. Can you return home to let him out on lunch breaks each day, or do you have someone else to walk him? Is there a doggie daycare provider in your area? Are you willing to spend time with your dog when on vacation? Or do you know of a reliable local pet sitter or boarding facility?

8. **Think Laws, Rules, and Neighbors:** Are you allowed to have a dog where you currently live? Does your city, county, or state have certain regulations concerning the breed(s) you are interested in? Do you have a landlord or neighbor who would not be happy with your decision? Are you willing to relocate, and deal with the limitations of finding future homes where dogs are allowed? If you are considering building a fence for the safety of your new canine friend, will your landlord, neighbor, or local neighborhood rules prohibit it? Will your dog be outside while you are away? A kennel or fenced yard would allow a dog to bark and disturb your neighbors. Are you willing to leave your dog confined indoors to prevent law enforcement issues?

7. **Think Experience:** Are you a first-time dog owner? Have you had dogs, but problems, too? Inexperienced owners need good first-time dogs. Be open and honest about your feelings and interests with professional "dog people" as you conduct your research. Take the time to find the dog that is right for your level of experience. Some breeds should never be taken on by new owners; for example, many working breeds (such as Rottweilers) and energetic herding breeds (like the German Shepherd Dog), hunting breeds (including the Weimaraner) or terrier breeds (such as the West Highland White Terrier). The basic areas of type, breed, age, and sex of your dog should all be carefully thought-out before you acquire a dog, especially if you are inexperienced.

6. **Think Stability:** Does everyone in the household agree with your decision to get a dog? It will not work if that is not the case. Remember, a dog is not just a pet, but it is a new member of the family! Is your family situation stable? Are there other major changes that may be taking place in the near future? Compare acquiring a dog to adopting a child. It is a huge financial and personal responsibility for all. If you are not sure if your family is ready, wait until you are. Also, don't give in to the children's wishes if you are not ready yourself.

5. **Think Children:** Do you have children or do you expect your dog to have much contact with youngsters? Children, especially under the age of six, should never be left unattended with a dog. A young baby-sitter is also not a reliable substitute for an adult. Talk to breeders when considering what breed would work best with your children. Even if you do not have children, you should consider socializing your new dog with a number of young people of different ages. You can avoid future aggression problems by socializing early.

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4. **Think Other Pets:** Do you have any other pets? If you do, assess compatibility. For example, greyhounds and cats usually do not mix well. **Do your research** into dog types and breeds, and individual dog histories. Do you have another dog? Often, two males or two females are more likely to fight than dogs in a male-female relationship. Some breeds will have certain tastes, so ask a breeder if you will have more than one dog. Should you find a dog you like, allow both dogs to meet in a neutral setting (not at home), and even if all goes well, consider keeping them separated for a while when they can't be supervised. **If you are concerned about the first meeting, you may arrange with Karen Palmer to assist you in monitoring the situation and ensuring that all goes well.**

3. **Think Lifestyle:** Hopefully, by this point most aspects of your lifestyle have already been scrutinized. Think about how often you travel away from home on business trips, family vacations, and daily with friends or with other activities. Are you willing and able to sacrifice some of that time to care for your dog, or take him with you? Can you integrate a dog into your activities, or will he be not welcome? Will your friends accept your new companion? You may want to check with them regarding any fear of dogs or allergies they may have.

2. **Think Health:** Are you or is anyone in your family allergic to dogs? If you are unsure, now is the time to find out. Spend some time with various dog breeds-- see your friends' dogs, ask to pet dogs you meet at the park, go to a grooming shop and spend some time there. If you find that you are allergic to any dog, be aware that you may be allergic to plants the dog walked through or rolled in, or any other shampoos, scents, or chemicals which may be in the dog's coat. Some types of dogs are often called "hypoallergenic". These dogs may simply shed less dander than others, and so are less of a problem for sensitive owners. If you are still unsure, a fostering situation may be the best option prior to making a final adoption decision. If you find that you cannot tolerate the allergies you have from dogs, you can pass on the adoption. You may be able to try a different breed or speak to your doctor about your options. As always, **do your research.**

1. **Think Problems:** Think all sorts of problems. Think shedding, flea and tick infestations and preventative costs, paw prints and drool on your clothing and furniture, digging in your yard, chewing of your possessions, vomiting in your car, barking at any time, housetraining accidents, health issues, aggressiveness, etc. Because anyone or more of these and other problems is likely to come up in any household, no matter how prepared you may be. How you deal with them is what's important. You must be prepared to either handle the problem yourself or get help from a professional. Most problems should not cause the end of your relationship with your dog. The best way to handle them is to avoid them by (guess what?) **doing your research!** Being ready means finding a dog that fits your family's situation in all the ways mentioned in this "think system".

The very best way to have a good, positive relationship with your dog is to **DO YOUR RESEARCH, before you find a dog.** Read about all aspects of dog care. Understanding what being a responsible dog owner entails *before* you get a dog can mean a big difference in the results. Remember, this is a new member of your family, so it is well worth your time. Do not get a dog until you are sure that you and/ or your family are ready.

You have already begun your journey toward responsible pet ownership! That is, you have if you read and considered all of the points above! If you are well prepared and feel ready for the commitment, you will not be disappointed. A good dog and a good owner can have a wonderful, rich, enlightened relationship that lasts a lifetime. It is absolutely a thing to be treasured! If you decide to find a canine companion, I wish you both the very best, and am available to assist you should the need arise.

If you decide that now is not the best time to adopt a dog, I commend you for taking the time to consider things and for being responsible. If you know someone else who is thinking about getting a dog, pass on what you have learned. If you should ever find yourself in possession of a dog you need to find a home for, please see Karen Palmer and Balanced Canine Training for more advice in, "What to Do if It Just Doesn't Work Out".