

Choosing the Right Pet for You Part 1: Dogs

by Diane Novak

In our last article we explored the medical and social benefits of pet ownership for older adults. If you have decided that a companion animal is right for you, Bravo!

But hang on. Before you run out and buy that new leash or litter box, I'd like you to take an honest appraisal of your physical limitations, lifestyle and financial abilities. It is far better to be brutally honest now than to deal with those 'heart in the right place' mistakes later on.

If you have limited finances, adopting a four legged creature may not be the best decision. With the cost of pet food, litter (for cats) and yearly visits to the vet, it is important to take a serious look at how the extra expense will impact your fixed income. You may decide a tank of fish, or a small bird is the wiser choice. With that said, there are probably more than one shelter and rescue group who is willing to give surplus food, and litter as a perk to senior citizens who adopt from them. Some veterinarians will even offer discounts to senior citizens who adopt a shelter animal.

Physical limitations such as walking with the aide of a cane or walker may pose a problem for individuals wishing to adopt a dog. However, if your home is graced with a fenced in yard, a dog could be an option providing there is someone to help clean up the yard and shovel a path for Fido on snowy days.

Since we're on the subject of dogs, let's talk for a moment about puppies. They are irresistible for sure, but when it comes to the amount of work required for their care, no animal comes close. Puppies don't have the luxury of a litter box and don't easily understand that relieving oneself is done 'outside' the home. Nope, pups will squat whenever nature calls, and, could care less if it's on the Oriental rug or the linoleum floor.

Puppies are babies. They teethe on anything they can get their mouths on and travel at warp speed across your polished floors. If you're physically up to the challenge, but not prepared for the middle of the night walks or early morning presents on the kitchen floor, I would forego the puppy route.

I believe in older animals for older adults. It just makes sense. Mature dogs are on your wave length. They basically sleep through the night, are up for a game of fetch whenever you are, and respect your need for 'space'. And even though the older pet has less need for your undivided attention, they are always appreciative of that well placed scratch or pat on the head.

Often the senior will be attracted to a smaller dog because it's assumed they will be easier to care for. However the 10 lb ball of fur you've been eyeballing could be a high

energy jumping bean in disguise, while that large older dog you passed along the way could be a docile couch potato just eager to curl up at your feet.

As with human alliances, choosing a companion based on breeding, size, or beauty, will never be the best tools for judging a long term commitment. Observing temperament, personality and the way one *feels* in each others company will always be the more reliable method for predicting a happy relationship.

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