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## Where to Get a Dog

*How to choose a trustworthy source and avoid online “puppy traps”*

Client handout • Educational only • Updated to match the Dog Subject Gold Standard

**Quick answer:** The best way to get a dog is through one of three trustworthy paths: a shelter or local rescue, a breed-specific rescue, or a responsible breeder who is easy to verify and who asks as many questions about you as you ask about them. The riskiest path is the instant-checkout style marketplace, mystery website, or pressure-heavy broker setup where you cannot clearly verify who bred the dog, how the dog was raised, what testing was done, and what happens if something goes wrong.

### Where to Get a Dog

How to choose a trustworthy source and avoid online “puppy traps”

Getting a dog is one of the biggest decisions a family makes, and the mistake most people make is starting with a cute photo instead of starting with the source. There are great dogs available through shelters, rescues, breed rescues, and responsible breeders. The safest path is not about whether the dog is purebred or mixed breed. It is about whether the source is transparent, ethical, and a good match for your real life.

The best way to get a dog is through one of three trustworthy paths: a shelter or local rescue, a breed-specific rescue, or a responsible breeder who is easy to verify and who asks as many questions about you as you ask about them. The worst path is the “instant checkout” style puppy marketplace, mystery website, or pressure-heavy broker setup where you cannot clearly verify who bred the dog, how the puppies were raised, what health testing was done, and what happens if something goes wrong.

### Why this matters more than people think

A dog is not a product. It is a living animal with genetics, early development, health history, stress thresholds, and behavior patterns that will affect your household for years. When people get a dog from a bad source, the problem is not only that they may overpay or get scammed. The bigger problem is that they may bring home a dog with preventable health issues, unstable early socialization, poor breeding decisions, or a temperament that is a bad fit for their family, children, other pets, housing, or lifestyle.

This is why “where did the dog come from?” matters so much. A good source does not just hand over a dog. A good source helps create a better match. A bad source focuses on speed, emotion, and convenience. A good source focuses on fit, transparency, and long-term outcome.



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and your own.*



## Start with the job of the dog, not the look of the dog

Before you decide where to get a dog, decide what job that dog needs to do in your life. That does not mean police work or competition. For most families, the job is something like this: calm companion, good with visitors, beach and neighborhood friendly, manageable in public, good with kids, athletic enough for hikes, or low-shed enough for the home.

This matters because people often reverse the process. They fall in love with a look, a breed trend, or a puppy photo, and only later realize the dog they chose does not fit their energy level, grooming tolerance, travel plans, housing, or training ability. A handsome dog with the wrong wiring for your lifestyle is still the wrong dog.

A useful way to think about it is the same way you would think about hiring for a role. You do not start with “who has the nicest headshot?” You start with “what do I need this individual to do every day?” Dogs are the same. If you want a dog who can settle in public, walk calmly through town, and enjoy a beach lifestyle, you need to think about stability, resilience, trainability, recovery from stimulation, coat care, and exercise demands.

## The three safest places to get a dog

### 1. Shelter or local rescue

For many families, this is the best starting point. Shelters and good rescues can have excellent dogs, especially adult dogs whose size, energy level, and visible temperament are easier to judge than an eight-week-old puppy. You may be able to skip some of the guesswork that comes with a very young dog.

This path is especially good for owners who are open-minded about breed labels and are more focused on behavior, size range, and overall compatibility. Plenty of wonderful family dogs are mixed breeds. Many are past the hardest puppy stage. Some already have known histories around kids, dogs, crates, house training, or public handling.

That said, rescue does not mean “no questions needed.” You still want to ask why the dog was surrendered, how the dog handles separation, whether it has shown resource guarding or dog reactivity, whether it has lived indoors, and what kind of structure it succeeds with. A good rescue should be able to tell you what they know, what they do not know, and what transition plan they recommend.

### 2. Breed-specific rescue

This is a strong option when you want a certain ballpark of size, temperament, coat type, or energy level but still want to adopt rather than buy from a breeder. Breed rescue can be a very smart middle ground. You may find young adults or older dogs whose breed tendencies are more visible than they would be in a puppy.

Breed rescue is also useful because these groups often understand the strengths and weaknesses of that type of dog. They usually know what tends to overwhelm first-time owners, what health issues to watch, and what kind of home setup is likely to work. That honesty matters. A good placement is not about talking you into a dog. It is about matching the dog responsibly.

### 3. Responsible breeder

A responsible breeder is not the same thing as an easy seller with nice photos. A real breeder is trying to improve or preserve a breed, not move inventory quickly. They are usually deeply knowledgeable about their line, their dogs' health history, temperament patterns, structure, and the type of home each puppy is likely to do best in.

This path can be worth it when you need more predictability. Maybe you want a dog for a very specific lifestyle, performance venue, allergy-management plan, coat type, size range, or long-term training goal. A good breeder gives you the best chance of understanding what you are getting genetically and developmentally.

But a responsible breeder should feel slower, not faster. They should ask questions. They should screen you. They should discuss health testing specific to the breed. They should explain how puppies are raised, socialized, handled, and placed. They should have a contract. They should care where the dog ends up for life.

## **What the online puppy trap looks like**

The online trap works because it is designed to feel easy. Nice photos. Simple checkout flow. “Available now.” Shipping options. Deposit button. Financing. Multiple breeds. No waiting. Minimal questions. It can feel as convenient as buying a household item online.

That is exactly the problem.

When the system is too frictionless, you should get suspicious. Good dog placement usually includes friction: questions, delays, verification, sometimes waiting lists, and a real conversation. The less the seller cares about who you are, the more careful you should become.

There are two major risks online. The first is the outright scam: fake listings, stolen photos, fake shipping arrangements, or “one more fee” requests after a deposit has already been sent. The second is the broker or marketplace model: even if a puppy does exist, you may be dealing with a middle layer that makes it hard to confirm the true breeder, the actual conditions, and the full paper trail.

That is why a polished website proves very little. A nice website can be built in a day. Real transparency is harder to fake. Can they clearly identify the breeder? Can they show proof of health testing? Can they show where the puppies are raised? Can they explain why this litter was produced? Can they tell you what support they provide after placement? Can you verify names, not just branding?

## **Red flags that should slow you down immediately**

A deposit is demanded before your questions are answered.

The website always seems to have puppies available right now.

There are many different breeds listed under one operation.

The seller avoids giving the breeder’s full name or exact location.

They use stock-like photos or repeated photos across listings.

The process is mostly about shipping, delivery, and payment.

They do not ask meaningful questions about your household or experience.

They cannot explain health testing in a breed-specific way.

They will not let you see where puppies are raised, either in person or in a credible live walkthrough.

Their language sounds salesy, vague, or strangely generic.

Any one of these does not automatically prove a disaster, but the pattern matters. Ethical dog sourcing should feel transparent, not slippery.

## What a responsible breeder looks like in real life

A responsible breeder usually does not feel like a salesperson. They often feel more like a gatekeeper or a careful matchmaker. They may have a waiting list. They may not promise you a puppy immediately. They may even tell you that their breed is a bad fit for your situation. Oddly enough, that honesty is a good sign.

### Here is what you should expect:

They know the breed deeply, including strengths and weaknesses.

They do health testing appropriate to that breed and can discuss the results clearly.

They can explain the purpose of the breeding, not just the color or appearance.

They are transparent about the parents, the litter, and the raising environment.

They ask serious questions about your home, schedule, fencing, training plans, and goals.

They offer a contract and a return policy.

They do not disappear after the sale.

They care about matching puppies to homes instead of letting buyers choose based only on markings.

A lot of people are surprised that a good breeder may not let you simply point to one puppy and say, “I want that one.” Many responsible breeders watch the puppies develop and then help place them based on temperament and home fit. That is not controlling. That is usually a sign that they actually know what they are doing.

## How to evaluate a rescue or shelter dog honestly

With rescues and shelters, the evaluation is a little different because the question is often not “was this dog bred well?” but “what do we know now, and how should we handle the transition?” The good news is that adult dogs tell you more about themselves right away.

Watch how the dog responds to handling, confinement, novelty, noise, eye contact, food, movement, and frustration. Ask whether the dog settles after arousal or stays wound up. Ask what the dog looked like in foster care, not just in the kennel environment. Some dogs are worse in kennels than in homes. Some are the opposite. You want the most home-relevant information possible.

This is also the place to stay realistic. A dog can be a wonderful dog and still not be the right dog for your house. For example, a dog may be lovely with adults but too intense for toddlers. A dog may be affectionate but sound-sensitive, escape-prone, or deeply uncomfortable around other dogs. The goal is not to “save” every dog. The goal is to choose responsibly.

## My rescue strategy recommendation

If you are planning to adopt through rescue, get pre-qualified before you find the perfect dog. That saves time and heartbreak. Many people find a dog first, then start the paperwork, references, and home check. By the time they are approved, the dog is gone.

A smarter approach is to complete applications with a few rescues you trust, understand their process ahead of time, and set alerts so you can move quickly when the right match appears. This is one of the few situations where doing paperwork before emotion is actually the easier path.

Bringing home an adult dog: think “new employee,” not “instant family member”

An older dog may be easier than a puppy in some ways, but that does not mean you should give full freedom on day one. I like the “new employee” rule. A new employee may be talented and have good intentions, but you would not make them CEO on their first afternoon. They still need orientation.

Adult rescue dogs need the same thing: clear routine, limited freedom, clean expectations, and a gradual expansion of privileges. Keep life predictable for the first one to two weeks. Use crates, gates, leashes, or x-pens. Prevent rehearsals of bad habits. Keep social situations controlled. Let the dog learn your household before you test it in ten complicated environments.

A huge amount of “the dog changed after adoption” is really just the dog finally showing more of itself once the initial shutdown period passes. That is normal. Structure helps you navigate that without chaos.

## **Human versus dog thinking on this topic**

Humans are very influenced by story, appearance, and urgency. Dogs are not. A person sees a photo and imagines a future. The dog arrives with genetics, habits, fears, and drives that do not care about the story in your head. That is why owners get into trouble when they shop emotionally.

People also tend to confuse availability with quality. In human shopping, immediate availability can be a plus. In dogs, immediate availability without screening can be a warning sign. That is a good human-versus-dog comparison to remember. Convenience is not the same as quality control.

## **Questions you should ask before saying yes**

### **Why is this dog or litter available?**

### **What is known about the dog’s health and behavior history?**

What health testing has been done, and what exactly does that mean?

### **How was the dog or litter raised day to day?**

What does the dog do when stressed, frustrated, left alone, or overexcited?

### **What support is available after placement?**

### **What happens if the placement does not work out?**

### **Can I verify the people, place, and paperwork involved?**

You are not being difficult by asking these questions. You are being responsible.

## Common mistakes people make

They choose with their eyes before choosing with their brain.

They underestimate how much genetics matter.

They assume a purebred automatically means well bred.

They assume rescue automatically means easy.

They get emotionally attached before checking the source.

They move too fast because they are afraid to miss out.

They ignore the dog's fit with kids, cats, travel, exercise, or public-life goals.

They forget that early management after adoption matters almost as much as where the dog came from.

## When to walk away

Walk away when the answers stay vague, when transparency is missing, when pressure is high, when the source seems designed to prevent verification, or when your gut says the story does not add up. Walk away when the dog is probably fine but not fine for your household. Walk away when the source is offended by reasonable questions. Good sources usually welcome informed questions.

It is far better to lose a deposit, lose time, or lose a “chance” at one dog than to spend years trying to manage a preventable mismatch or a dog sourced through a dishonest system.

## Final takeaway

There are great dogs in shelters, rescues, breed rescues, and from responsible breeders. The safest path is the one that is transparent, verifiable, and appropriate for your actual life. Start with the job of the dog. Be honest about your household. Avoid any system that feels like a fast online checkout for a living animal. Slow, careful, and boring is often the right path here.

A good source should make you feel more informed, not more pressured. It should be easier to verify, not harder. And once the dog comes home, good handling starts with structure, realism, and understanding what kind of dog is actually in front of you, not just the picture you hoped for.

## Quick links

**Petfinder - <https://www.petfinder.com/>**

AKC breeder referral contacts - <https://www.akc.org/akc-breeder-referral-contacts/>

AKC rescue network - <https://www.akc.org/akc-rescue-network/>

## References used in the source version

### AKC - How to spot a puppy scam online

Humane World / HSUS - Puppy broker dealers factsheet

ASPCA - Puppy laundering

Stop Online Puppy Mills - Online puppy brokers

AKC - Responsible breeders

Animal Humane Society - How to evaluate a breeder

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