

Buying A Therapy Dog

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW!



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Buying a therapy dog - what you need to know!

You might see advertisements for dogs or puppies being sold as 'Therapy Dogs', but you should know that you can't just buy a Therapy Dog. Here's why:

1. Why You Can't Buy A Therapy Dog

- A Therapy Dog is a dog who has been specially trained and assessed with their handler to meet a minimum standard (demonstrated through obedience, manners & suitable temperament).
 - The Therapy Dog AND their handler work as a team. Even if a dog is trained, they aren't a Therapy Dog with you until you go through training and assessment with the dog.
- So, you cannot buy a Therapy Dog puppy because the team hasn't been formed yet.

2. Why are Therapy Dogs and puppies advertised for sale?

People might advertise dogs or puppies as Therapy Dogs for two reasons:

- They might be trying to increase profit and sales by misleading buyers.
- They might not understand what a Therapy Dog is and are not aware they are misrepresenting the puppies.

This misrepresentation can cause great confusion and disappointment as people are unknowingly buying young dogs with the misconception that they are guaranteed their dog will be a Therapy Dog.



Therapy Dog Potential:

Please know that NO ONE can guarantee that a puppy will turn into anything when they mature. This is true for all dogs who are bred for specific jobs/working roles/sporting roles. There are various factors which are considered when determining an adult dog's suitability any particular job, these include:



- 1. Breed traits**
- 2. Individual genetics (can influence things like 'drive' and temperament e.g. anxiety/aggression)**
- 3. Health status**
- 4. Early puppyhood development**
- 5. Early training**
- 6. Life events - possible traumas etc.**

Some of these things are heavily influenced by the breeder (the breeding pairs they choose, their early development of the puppies), some are heavily influenced by you (the owner of the dog) and what you do with your dog once you get them home, and some are influenced by chance, luck or even bad luck.



How do you choose a puppy with potential to become a Therapy Dog?

Step 1: Make A Plan:

·Decide on the type of role you want the Therapy Dog to do. Do you plan to take a dog into a school? Incorporate a dog into a Private Practice service? Or maybe volunteer in a nursing home?

This is important in terms of choosing a breed of dog - more on this later.



Step 2: Consider Your Lifestyle:

·Lifestyle factors are critical in selecting a suitable dog. Have a serious think about:

- Your family - members, ages, stages.
- Living situation - owning/renting, size of yard, access to shade and shelter.
- Lifestyle - how much time do you spend at home and away, working long hours, going on adventures.
- Your previous experience with training dogs (not owning dogs, actually training dogs).

This is the MOST important thing to consider. Your dog will be your family pet for the rest of it's life (around 12-15 years), so it is critical that they fit into your life. Despite doing everything you can to set your dog up for success, it may or may not be possible for your dog to become a Therapy Dog, so you need to ensure that your dog fits into your lifestyle.

How do you choose a puppy with potential to become a Therapy Dog? (cont.)

Step 4: Careful Breed Selection:

Research is important and there are great resources available to help you understand breed characteristics. A good starting point is to explore the breed traits using website such as the American Kennel Club. **(Decide on the type of role you want the Therapy Dog to do. Do you plan to take a dog into a school? Incorporate a dog into a Private Practice service? Or maybe volunteer in a nursing home? This is important in terms of choosing a breed of dog - more on this later).**

It is important to note that not all dogs of the same breed will be the same, but it is highly likely that they will have traits of their breed. That is because dogs were always bred for a purpose, and so those traits have been bred into them for hundreds or sometimes thousands of years! It is really important to research your breeds before you start looking at breeders.

If you are choosing a cross bred dog (e.g. any kind of 'oodle', including 'Cobberdogs' as these were developed from the Labrador x Poodle, or Theodores which were developed from Cavalier King Charles x Poodle) then you will need to understand both (or more) of the breeds that contribute to the dogs genetics. With a cross breeding, there is no guarantee of what traits will be passed down to the puppy so please do assume the puppy will be the BEST traits of both breeds. That can happen, yes, but you equally might get the WORST traits of both! Usually, it is a lottery of traits - and you won't know really what these are until the dog starts to mature. This related to both temperament and health traits.



How do you choose a puppy with potential to become a Therapy Dog? (cont.)

Step 5: Choosing A Breeder:

Finding a good breeder is really hard! It can be challenging to detect who the reputable and trustworthy breeders are. Puppy farmers absolutely DO exist and they are very clever about hiding their unethical practices (multiple kennel names etc.).



There are a few great questions to ask your breeders:

a). Ask about the breeding parents:

Find out about the parents of this mating (litter). Have they made this pairing previously and what can they tell you about previous litters. Good breeders will share information and be transparent.

The breeder I most recently used for a pup was able to tell me of someone in my area who had a previous litter dog, and assisted me to make contact with them and to meet their dog. They also gave me the social media profiles of previous pups (some pups have their own public profiles) and forward me videos of pups in their new homes. In addition she shared photos and videos of pups from previous litters on her breeder facebook page which really helped me understand much more about her litters and breeding.

How do you choose a puppy with potential to become a Therapy Dog? (cont.)

b). Check if the breeder engages in Early Development Programs for the puppies:

It is important to ask breeders how they are preparing their puppies for their lives ahead. Early Development Programs which explore Early Neurological Stimulation (ENS), Early Scent Introduction (ESI) and Puppy Culture programs can really support puppies in their development, resilience and formation of coping mechanisms. Breeders engaging in these types of programs demonstrates an understanding of the importance of early canine brain development.

You can find out more information on this topic in a couple of our podcast episodes (find these [here](#) on the juniors page of our website).



c). Ask about health testing:

What kinds of health testing do they do and are you able to see the results.

We have heard horror stories of breeders continuing to breed dogs who have produced pups with serious health defects. Consider asking them this question in an email, so that the answer is in writing. Breeders who are selling dogs are bound by the same 'false advertising' laws as every other merchant.

d). Understand how pups are chosen and allocated:

Most reputable breeders recognise that puppies should be allocated based on temperament traits aligning with your goals for a puppy. Ideally you shouldn't simply choose a puppy from the litter because of its physical characteristics (such as coat colour, markings). Puppy temperament evaluations can commence at about 7 weeks of age and allocations of puppies can then be made which are most suited to your needs, based on the temperament evaluation. If they do not have a puppy in this litter that suits your needs, wait for the next litter or choose another breeder.

How do you choose a puppy with potential to become a Therapy Dog? (cont.)

e). See the living conditions of the pups and parents:

Ask to see the puppies either in person or do a face-time video to try and understand the living conditions of the pups. A reputable breeder will allow potential buyers to visit the puppies living area, ensuring transparency and giving them an opportunity to see firsthand the conditions in which the puppies are raised. A good breeder will prioritise the health, safety and wellbeing of their puppies, ensuring that their living conditions are clean, comfortable, and conducive to healthy development.



f). Word of Mouth:

Talk to people who have bought from the breeder. Good breeders are often recommended by others in the dog community.

With all of this please remember that breeders are busy and the ethical ones don't make any profit from their dogs. So, when you ask all of these questions, be prepared that they may want you to pay a deposit before they put a heap of effort into answering a million questions for you. Ask if the deposit can be refunded if you decide against the puppy from the information you have gathered.



My experiences buying puppies and the lessons I have learned:



Kiki- The Anatolian Shepard, Livestock Guardian Dog:

With my most recent pup (Kiki - Anatolian Shepherd, Livestock Guardian Dog), I contacted the breeders that I saw another very experienced dog person had used. That breeder told me the other breeders he recommends (he was not taking names for a wait list, dogs were too popular!). He also told me of one breeder to stay away from and lucky he did because I had been looking at their litter!

I contacted the other breeders - they all knew each other and recommended each other, and some had each others dogs in their breeding programs.

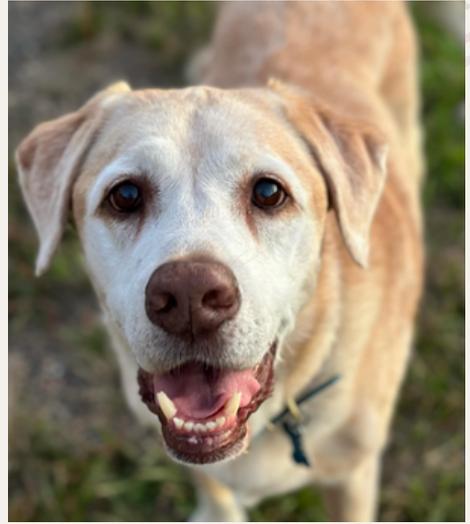
After receiving my pup, two of the other breeders have followed the puppies journey via my facebook page and they regularly comment on my new dog! All of these breeders have offered support and advice which has been amazing. These are people who really, really love their breed! Every step of the way they have provided support to assist me to make a good choice about the breed, the individual puppy, and the training of the puppy. Now you can't ALL expect this level of involvement (mine was a more rare breed, so a smaller community etc.) but you should have some expectations of your dogs breeder.



Sonny- Labrador

Since we are telling stories - I might as well share about my other dogs.

Sonny (Labrador) - backyard bred dog I bought for \$450 out of the trading post in 2002, picked him up from a service station in North Brisbane with no information. The literal best dog in the world! Has had some allergies but otherwise robust. Still a part-time, work from home, Therapy Dog at 12.5yrs old (started the job at 18mths).



Isabelle- Bearded Collie

Isabelle (Bearded Collie) - purchased from a pedigree breeder for about \$1200. Was promised \$200 refund with desexing certificate. Never got that. Dogs were in kennels, but property seemed ok. Breeder let me choose her at 6 weeks old, sent them home at 10 weeks old. I found out the day I picked her up that half the litter died from a worm burden - the rest were lucky to survive. Isabelle had health issues and eventually died of some kind of spleen issue at 7yrs old. She was never a Therapy Dog due to a head injury at 10mths old (paddock accident, no ones fault).



Oliver- Border Collie

Purchased as pedigree for about \$1000 from a photo I saw on facebook of the last one available in a litter, ready in a week. He was an impulse purchase. Amazing dog! Lovely breeder, it was her first time breeding. Everyone loves Oliver. I purposely wanted a 'show lines' border collie, so not too much 'drive' and he is exactly that. Has been a Therapy Dog his whole life and is still now at 9yo. Wonderful dog. Breeder still my friend on facebook. Breeder mated the same parents and one of the siblings did our course when she was young. She was very similar but the owners didn't continue with her - she did develop some level of anxiety but this appeared to be separation anxiety, so probably not a fault in the dog. They are very happy with her as a pet dog (she is their whole families world).





Nala- Labrador

I looked and looked for ENS breeders, couldn't find anyone doing it so settled for a random pedigree breeder close to where I live. Paid \$1800. They let me choose a puppy at like 4 weeks old. The puppy looked at me, I was in love, it had to be her! Picked her up at 8 weeks and she is just the light of my life. Her breeders were experienced in choosing matings, but not so much in early puppy development. She had a surface preference for concrete because of how they had their patio set up (meaning she wanted to wee on concrete) - pain in the bum but you can usually fix that (and we did, but I am a dog trainer!).

Her breeder owns a shop near my clinic and if we walk past and he has no customers he will come out and say hello. As soon as Nala sees his beard she goes STUPID with excitement - excitement I don't see anywhere else! It's very special to see and he absolutely loves her back. She is almost 5yo and an absolutely wonderful therapy dog.

Kikimora- Anatolian Shepherd/Kangal

She is the most recent dog, who the story above is about. She is not a Therapy Dog in training, she is a Livestock Guardian Dog (so also training for a job, which is to guard our pet goats from predators). At the time of writing this she is about 8 months old. We are working hard but will not know if I have trained her successfully until she is about 2yrs old. So far, we are looking pretty ok!





As you can see - I have made all of the mistakes and learned things along the way. Is there no hope for a backyard bred dog? I couldn't say that because Sonny is quite literally the best dog in the world... but I put a LOT of work into him. As I did with my other dogs. I put 2 years of solid effort into my new dogs before I start to relax a bit and enjoy the fruits of my labour. Are you taking unnecessary risks by buying a backyard bred dog? Yes. I think so. Would I do it again? Depends. I can be pretty impulsive. But I am also willing to wear it if I stuff it up - and I live on a farm with space to buy another dog if I need to. Do you have that option? Probably the takeaway message is to do your research, ask around, educate yourself as much as possible and then trust your gut! Once you have your puppy - then the hard work starts!





Are you considering a Guardian Dog (a dog on a breeding contract)?



Some breeders will offer their dogs on a guardian contract. A guardian contract is when you get your dog at a reduced price under a contract that they will be returned to the breeder for anywhere between (usually) 1 - 3 litters. They leave you for their mating, come back to you and then go back to the breeder to live with them in the days leading up to whelping (birth). They will then stay with the breeder until the pups are weaned, so they will come back to you anywhere between 6-8 weeks after whelping.

I am not totally against this, as we absolutely need to breed from proven great dogs! But please make an informed decision as there will be disruption to your dogs life, and that can impact them (and your clients) negatively. But - we need to have great, successful, proven dogs available to breed the next generation. How can we do that without putting proven Therapy Dogs back into breeding programs? I don't know.

Are you considering a Guardian Dog (a dog on a breeding contract)? (cont.)



Choose wisely here:

- Who is this breeder?
- Are they close by?
- How do they keep the dogs (in kennels or in the house)?
- How many whelping bitches do they have on the go at any one time?
- What is involved in the contract?
- How many litters?
- How much control does the breeder have over how you raise your dog - what you feed your dog etc.
- What is the process to breaking the contract? This is really important!

I have a client who has a guardian dog and the dog came back from the second litter a week late with the pups NOT weaned (mum still leaking milk) and with a debilitating anxiety disorder. We don't know what happened, but I can make a few assumptions based on the state of the dog on return. That dog is still on contract to breed. The breeder doesn't seem overly concerned about the state of the dog now. Red flags!!! Unfortunately, you often only find these things out when it's already too late.

I also know other stories of guardians who have gone back to the breeder and have come back 'not quite themselves' and can take weeks (or longer) to return to their 'normal selves' - this can be because the routine at the breeders house (incl. being around other dogs and people) can disrupt them - which is normal enough. However, I like to know exactly what my own dogs have been exposed to as this helps me to predict and manage their future behaviours.



Therapy Dogs Australia - Educated Breeders Program

We offer a short course available for breeders to assist them in their understanding of what a therapy dogs role can be (there are many) and what type of temperament we are typically looking for in a puppy. This course does involve lectures and quizzes so that we can know that the breeders have made sense of the content. HOWEVER we are not in a position to regulate these breeders in any way. We are relying on the breeders to make strong ethical decisions about their dogs and the recommendations/claims that they make to their buyers.

It is not possible for us to be involved in every breeders program. Therefore, please use the same scrutiny when vetting these breeders as you would with any other breeder.



Educated Breeder

The breeders who have received this information from us may be wearing a 'Therapy Dogs Australia - Educated Breeder' badge on their website - this will mean that they have done our course. However, you are encouraged to double check with us if the breeder has actually done the course, or if they have acquired the badge in some other nefarious manner (we hope this doesn't happen, but it could).



Get In Touch

You can find more information about Therapy Dogs Australia via our website www.therapydog.com.au.

To get in touch with us, please email info@therapydog.com.au and our team will assist you.

If you'd like to learn more about our Juniors Mentoring Program, [click here!](#)

If you're a breeder and would like to complete our Breeders Education short course, [click here!](#)

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