

# CHOOSING A DOG

I live in a narrow old house on the northwest side, 23 feet wide, with my wife and two small children. The place is crammed full of toys, books, and old furniture we've inherited and can't bear to toss out. You literally cannot go four steps in any direction without stepping on, tripping over, bumping into or knocking down someone or something. So naturally, my wife thinks we should get a dog.

We currently dog-sit through the week for Klaus, a large Weimaraner whose age has left him stiff and shaky. It's precarious for him to get around tight corners over slippery wood floors. But once Klaus is standing somewhere—say, the kitchen doorway or at the top of the stairs—it's impossible for him to turn and move out of the way. Overall, it's like sharing the house with a partially mobile piano bench with a nose for table scraps.

But I like dogs well enough, and I go along with the argument that having a dog is good for kids. So we've started researching various breeds, reading all the guidebooks about how to choose the most suitable dog for us. One book rates the breeds over 18 categories, including territoriality, obedience and problem-solving ability. Now, maybe I'm a control freak, but I think getting a dog that has good problem-solving ability is asking for trouble, unless you've got a circus or law-enforcement background.

Armed with this ranking mechanism, my family is trying to decide what kind of dog we really want. One that will protect the kids, of course, but not pick fights with any creature bigger than a hamster. Not too hyper—that would make me feel older than I'd like. Not too sedate, either—that would make me feel like I'm rushing my life away. I'm not about to feed and support some lazy animal who'll harbor such contempt for my lifestyle; my kids will be teenagers soon enough.

Somehow, it's been harder than we thought it would be. This whole process feels unnatural, searching in the abstract for the ideal animal. How can I stand in judgment from afar, armed with a couple of checklists? A handful of features doesn't add up to a whole dog. We're looking for a pet, after all, not an appliance.

While this is going on, we're also looking for an appropriate school for my four-year-old son. This makes choosing a dog seem like, well, a walk in the park. As any parent can tell you, the umpteen variables involved in choosing a school make neat, tidy decisions impossible.

Complicating this is the fact that my son, who is a very sweet and intelligent little boy, is also what they call a "high-functioning autistic." This condition makes

personal interaction very difficult for him. Conversations are hard work, and he's clueless on the subtle, unwritten rules of human behavior. Someone once described his condition as "constant culture shock," as he tries to guess and fake his way through the day with other people. The noise and unpredictability of a group of kids, even familiar ones, can cause him to withdraw completely. To avoid this, he'll need a small, stable class, so we're focusing our search on private and parochial schools.

What we're discovering is that some of these private schools have categories and checklists of their own. The screening can be subtle or not-so-subtle, but it's always apparent. One checklist item is whether a prospective pupil has any type of special needs. If so, then the private schools don't want him, even for kindergarten.

But wait, my wife and I insist, he's not disruptive. If anything, he's in danger of fading into the background. My son's a wonderful artist, he can already read at a third-grade level, and he can sing at perfect pitch. He'd be an asset to any class, while needing only a modest amount of special attention and patience.

But all these positive qualities become tainted somehow when they're accompanied by a special need. People begin to wonder: Is his early reading a strength or a symptom? And what will his needs be in the future, as if this question doesn't apply to every kid. Even in an era of growing appreciation for different learning styles and teaching methods, apparently for some people, the category of "special needs" remains a trump.

These blanket judgments we've been receiving may be what's keeping me from using charts, checklists and averages to choose a family dog. It makes me feel uncomfortable, judgmental, even hypocritical. Who among us would want to be carved up and categorized like this? Who could survive it?

Maybe my family and I should just go down to the animal shelter and see if any dogs there might like to choose us. As anyone can tell you, dogs are excellent judges of character. If they have a set of checklists for us humans, at least they're tactful about it and keep it to themselves. Whatever our faults, we have lots of good qualities too, and honestly we're doing the best we can.

