

## **How to Choose a Breeder**

Puppies are not born as blank slates. Whether from a shelter, rescue, or a breeder with years of experience, all puppies carry genes whose expression is shaped by the environment around and within them. While we have scientific data as well as expert anecdotes suggesting how to breed for health and temperament, we still have only scratched the surface of how to consistently and successfully juggle multiple breeding goals at once. Given the magnitude of misinformation available, the practical and ethical complexity, as well as various taboos in pet-loving subcultures, it's no surprise that accurate specifics of how pet owners should select a breeder have been slow to reach the public. Even for those with insider knowledge it can be difficult to find a breeder whose priorities and philosophies align with our own. Shallow knowledge of what breeding entails, may provide a false sense of security, but deep diving into breeding practices can serve to stack the deck in our favor. We can make good predictions about which breeders and dogs are most likely to produce pups that meet our goals.

This guide will outline the key points to focus on when looking for a breeder, giving examples or further reading as applicable. Please note I am not affiliated with the breeders I mention nor am I specifically recommending them. Example websites are from breeders I admire, but you need to find the right fit for *you*.

### **Where to start?**

Often people choose to get a particular breed of dog based on appearance, the nostalgia of a dog they once knew or other emotion-based reasons. I'm not shaming anyone for wanting what they want; I have my own preferences after all! But I encourage you to look past rationalizations or best case scenarios. It is important to think critically about your ability to train and care for a particular dog under the less-than-ideal circumstances that life often brings.

***When choosing a breed or mix***, it's important to first look up what their original function was and what types of behaviors were necessary for that job. If it's available and it isn't too gory for you, look up actual video footage of working dogs in action. Can you picture how that [\*\*IPO champion German Shepherd in the sports ring\*\*](#), an athlete with many hundreds of hours of training to channel their pulling, barking and biting behaviors, may naturally want to behave on your city walk with the amount of training effort you can (and *will*) realistically put in? How might the predatory tenacity and go-getter attitude of a [\*\*rat-killing Jack Russell terrier\*\*](#) affect your garden? How might the excitement-elicited [\*\*baying of a coonhound\*\*](#) affect your relationship with your neighbors? Breed-typical behaviors don't disappear in dogs who lack exposure to the environment they were originally bred for; those instincts or needs will be expressed in some form. If you want a dog who fits your aesthetic preferences, but also has a social, outgoing temperament, and can thrive with minimal housepet training, chances are there's a good breeder out there with that goal too, though the breed or mix might be new to you.



**Looking for breeders** once you have a breed or type in mind can be equally daunting. Breed club listings may be a good starting place if you want a purebred dog close to the traditional breed standard. Some doodle variations and other mixed breeds now have breed clubs as well, though much like purebred clubs, they vary in quality. Gooddog.com, Google, Facebook breed enthusiast groups, etc. are all valid starting places as long as you read further into this guide and do the work to verify a breeder's claims. Good reviews or a breeder claiming years of experience are not good enough. Check out the Google business listings for [kennels that were eventually shut down for neglect and abuse](#) and puppy mills that made the [horrible hundred list](#), and you're bound to find positive reviews. I personally have had training clients purchase from puppy mill brokers based on recommendations from well-meaning but misinformed friends, leading to more medical and behavioral struggles than expected. My clients' heartache and the suffering of their dogs have motivated me to write this guide.

Be prepared to go through at least a dozen or more page listings and websites before finding breeders who match your goals closely enough to warrant reaching out to. Then, be prepared for at least some of those breeders to be too swamped with inquiries to reply. You should also expect to fly, or ideally drive, to pick up your puppy. Finding a great local breeder with dogs of your desired breed or mix who have your desired temperament, can be quite rare.



"Pet quality" dogs from working lines will still display a predisposition for working-type traits. Be familiar with what your breeder's dogs do, or were historically bred to do.





## Framing the search.

Now that you've gathered some listings or website leads, let's establish some basics. Our goal is to find a responsible breeder, right? But what does that mean? The subjectivity of 'responsible' aside, it's rare to find breeders who check every box for any person's ideal picture of what breeding should look like. How many and which ticks in the "good" or "bad" boxes make a breeder responsible or irresponsible? Breeders have priorities and biases that vary, from slight to extreme, as well as differing risk acceptance or aversion. These different breeding decisions allow for slightly differing lineages of dogs even within a breed, increasing the diversity both of genetics (slightly) and available choices for puppy buyers. Furthermore, there are plenty of breeders most people would agree are not using ideal breeding practices, but rather than being neglectful, cruel or mass producing dogs, they're in an ethical gray area. It's therefore up to the potential buyer to decide what practices are absolutely vital to them versus what is simply on the wishlist, and then find a breeder who matches up. I avoid black and white labels of judgment in favor of a more useful framework: color coded flags.

**Green flags** are things that stand out as positive signs when considering science-based or plausible, widely accepted knowledge and recommendations. I also use this to highlight what I, as a dog trainer, like to see from a behavior and training standpoint.

**Yellow flags** are things that cast doubt or suspicion, may be problematic, or are not necessarily bad, but require further inquiry and effort on the part of the puppy buyer.

**Red flags** ring alarm bells for misleading, unethical, or potentially harmful practices. What I consider a red flag for a pet dog breeder may not be as big a priority to you, and it may actually be a benefit in other populations (eg. dogs bred to work). Keep in mind these labels are subjective and that's okay.

Terms that may pop up in your search:

**Responsible breeder** is typically used to denote a narrow and subjective view of what a particular person considers ethical or even ideal breeding practices. Despite so much proclaimed love and support for responsible breeders, if you ask people their opinion of the specifics needed to hold this title, they often struggle to define it in terms of consistent and measurable criteria.

**Puppy mill** is a derogatory term for a commercial breeding establishment (CBE). Depending on the speaker, *puppy mill* may be used to specify a subset of CBEs that are on the neglectful, abusive end of the spectrum versus CBEs that come closer to meeting the needs of their breeding dogs, but many people use the terms interchangeably. All commercial breeding establishment setups aim to produce puppies as quickly as possible for profit, often on as large a scale as you would see in a factory or livestock farm. In some parts of the world, *puppy farm* is the derogatory term rather than puppy mill. Because dogs in these facilities are indeed legally defined as property on par with livestock, there are states in which conditions that could get *pet owners* in trouble with the law for neglect or abuse of companion animals, are perfectly legal for facilities within the same states. The loopholes in the [legal standards](#) we have in the US allow for many violations (physical evidence of abuse, neglect, or danger) to be hidden from the public and swept under the rug even when found by government inspectors. Nearly all pet store puppies come from high-output, profit-focused facilities such as these, either directly or through brokers, and there are many websites that exist to market and sell



these puppies. For more details about the commercial pet breeding industry, I recommend the book [The Doggie in the Window](#), by journalist Rory Kress. As is explored in the book, there are rare commercial breeding establishments trying to do better. My opinion is that the nature of high volume breeding is incompatible with decent welfare for breeding dogs and proper puppy development. Staff-to-puppy and expense-per-puppy ratios that are profitable for a large business facility do not provide enough of the human interaction, attention, and quality care per puppy that are necessary to support healthy emotional and cognitive development.

**Backyard breeder** is a vague derogatory term used to designate a wide range of breeders. It may be used for a family who thinks sterilization is overrated and allows their pets to breed freely, or for a breeder who has a fantastically well thought out, responsible program but is considered inferior because their opinions or priorities differ from the status quo. Many people consider all mixed breed dogs, especially doodles, to be backyard bred by default, regardless of the level of care and thought that goes into a particular program. Some hold the same opinion of breeders who intentionally breed pets rather than working or show dogs, especially if the chosen breed was not originally a toy or companion breed. It's even common for people to believe that a written breed standard's stipulations on physical form and appearance (including strict coat color requirements) must be adhered to, or else the breeding is inherently irresponsible.

**Mixed breed** is a dog descended from multiple pure breeds, rather than a purebred or a dog from a free roaming population [without any breed](#).

**Mixed breeding program** conveys a plan to breed past first generation crosses between two breeds, with no intention to breed later generations back to one of the original pure breed populations (see "outcrossing"). Sometimes there is a goal to create a new breed, but some breeders merely aim to create healthy dogs suited for competing in sports, or for the high expectations of domestic pet life, without caring about breed labels or a consistent physical appearance.

**Cross breeding** typically refers to breeding one purebred dog to another purebred dog, creating half-and-half offspring. Usually this first generation cross is the end goal. These crosses can be surprisingly consistent in physical type and temperament. Some organizations have found first generation crosses better suited for a particular job than any accessible purebred, including the parent breeds in the cross. Two examples are golden retriever/Labrador retriever crosses in guide dog work and Belgian malinois/German shepherd crosses in police dog work.

**Outcrossing** is introducing new genetics to an otherwise closed population of dogs (highly similar genes) in order to increase genetic diversity, with the goal of subsequently improving the health and vitality of a pure breed. Typically this is done by crossing to different subpopulations (sporting, show, working, etc.) within the same breed, but outcrossing to different breeds is slowly becoming more common and accepted. An example of this is the [Chinook Breed Conservation Program](#).

**Inbreeding** is breeding two closely related individuals, with the goal of producing pups that are highly similar to their parents in behavior and/or primarily appearance. The term is most commonly used to denote immediate relations such as breeding a mother to her son, or sister-brother breedings.

**Line breeding** is a form of inbreeding, typically suggesting more strategy and involving more distant relations. For instance, breeding cousin to cousin, aunt to a nephew, etc. As with any inbreeding, the





goal of line breeding is to quickly increase the consistency of desirable traits. This lowers genetic diversity of the population, increasing the risk of expressing genes (usually recessive, or hidden in the parents) that cause disease or disorder.

**Studbook** is a registry for the family history (pedigree) of most or all dogs within a breed. The predecessors of listed dogs are known, often as far back as the origin of the breed. Studbooks may be *open*, allowing the registration of dogs with one or both parents outside of the family tree, or *closed*, allowing only dogs who are offspring of parents both already in a registered pedigree to breed. Many purebred lines can no longer be registered with a specific breed club because a specific breeder or group of breeders had different opinions or breeding priorities, and split from the goal of the original group. Closed studbooks, the norm, result in a highly controlled and limited genepool. This means dogs from these populations are very consistent compared to the population of all dogs, but because each generation loses some diversity from previous generations, there likely are not enough healthy individuals with *ideal* genes in a given population to maintain the health of the entire breed long term without outcrossing outside the breed.

## What is health testing?

Mating closely related and similar dogs, with a focus on consistent physical and behavioral traits, has also led to higher rates of disease or risky physical structure in virtually all breeds. Certain physical characteristics that may even be hallmarks of a given breed can affect physical abilities, health, behavioral predispositions and emotional or physical comfort. Some health concerns are shared by many, most or all breeds, while some are specific to just one or two breeds. These issues do not necessarily go away when mixing breeds, but are also not necessarily compounded into unpredictable, unhealthy frankendogs as some people claim. It's generally true that diversity is healthy for a population and I hope to see the acceptance of outcross programs continue to expand in the future, but **genetics are complicated!** Health testing parent dogs and only breeding those without risky genetic mutations or other identifiable health problems, is one way we can dramatically reduce the risk of particular health problems being passed on. Of course, most breeders are not selecting dogs exclusively for health. Most breeders are attempting to balance good health with other traits such as the shape of the skull, the way their dogs move, their dogs' natural motivation to retrieve, etc. The more goals breeders have to juggle, and the fewer dogs in a given purebred population, the more difficult it becomes to keep all known health concerns a top priority to eliminate. Three main terms to know are:

**Genetic health testing**, as it sounds, gives insight into the genes that a dog may pass on to offspring. This can cover things like coat color (eg. most merle dog to merle dog pairings produce impaired puppies, but certain genes for merle coloration don't produce coat patterns visible to the naked eye), markers that suggest coat texture or length (great for breeding low shedding dogs), or the risk of passing on particular genetic diseases. This is a good and very important practice for many breeds, but it is limited, as many serious health problems cannot at this time be determined by genetic testing. Even the diseases we can test for may be too complicated to be predicted by one or a few genes with 100% accuracy.



**Physical/phenotypic health testing** is performed by a veterinary specialist or veterinarian with additional training. These tests offer more information about the health of a certain organ or body part, which may suggest the likelihood of offspring inheriting defect or disease in that body part. This can be estimated even if the parent isn't currently showing clinical signs of pain or illness, as all of the following have strong genetic components. Certification can be pass/fail or on a grading system. The following is not an exhaustive list! The most common and largely considered vital tests are:

- Graded hip and pass/fail elbow x-rays in large and most medium sized breeds, as outlined by the **OFA** (hip and elbow) or **PennHip** (hip only, [details here](#)) programs to screen for likelihood and potential severity of dysplasia. When you look at OFA hip and elbow results, be aware that preliminary tests are subject to change; they are not the same as final results and are not graded the same way. This is based on what OFA is measuring: the wear and tear that a joint has sustained over time. [Read more here](#) on interpreting OFA's grading scale for joints. Keep in mind OFA results are also breed-conformation dependent. This means an "excellent" result for an English bulldog may have been a "fair" result or worse if the same dog were a Siberian husky, based on what's considered normal structure for the breed rather than solely the risk of future pain and/or dysfunction. Although there are still great benefits to the tests, the validity of OFA results for hips, and especially elbows, have been called into question in recent years. PennHip on the other hand was designed after decades of data suggesting looseness or laxity of joints, rather than shape of the joints, is more predictive of pain and dysfunction later in life. While the link above details how to read PennHip results, [click here](#) for a scientific study summary by the AHAA, that compares the different hip tests directly. Breeders who pursue both OFA and PennHip results to get a well rounded picture of the hip health they may produce in puppies, get an extra Green Flag!
- Eye exams are done by a certified veterinary ophthalmologist ([CAER](#), also through OFA) to determine the presence and estimated heritability of a variety of potentially very painful diseases, not just blindness. Eye and certain cardiac tests offer a snapshot into current health, which may not be predictive of late-onset illness.
- Cardiac testing ([OFA again](#), a powerhouse of programs), which may include just one or multiple different tests depending on the risk of various diseases in a breed or specific lineage. Some breeders are also starting to test dogs in breeds without a history of problems, to create data that may benefit the larger population rather than only the pups they produce. Again, huge Green Flag and kudos to these breeders.
- Patellar luxation in smaller and some medium sized breeds, done by any vet and submitted to the OFA ([details here](#)).

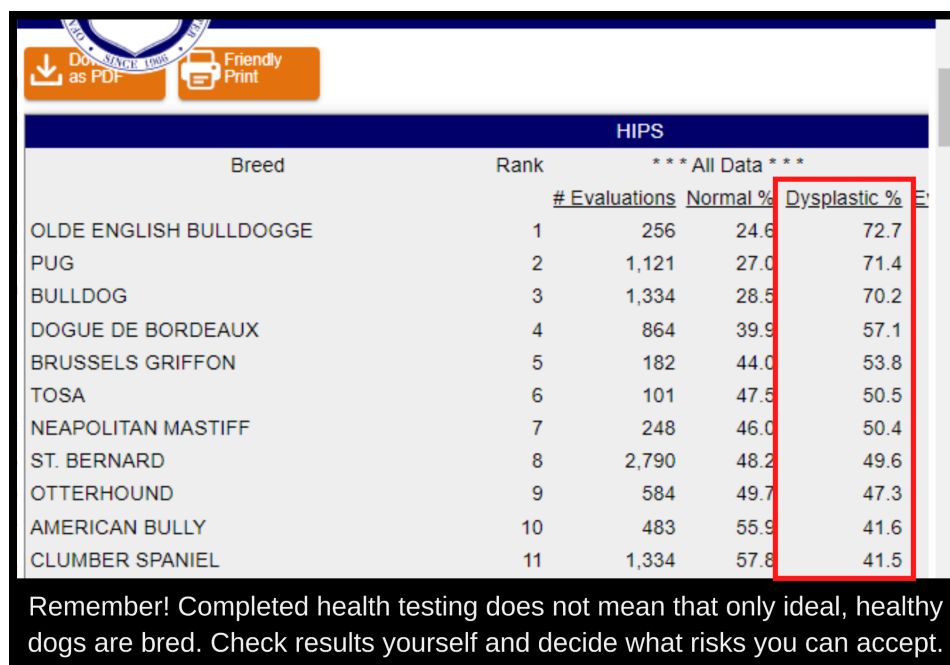
**Vet check, vaccination record** and **health status** are often cited as stand-ins for legitimate health testing. Some of the time this is likely a naive misunderstanding of what health testing is and its value, but often they are worded seemingly deliberately to mislead potential buyers. Vaccinations and vet checks are important, but these should be considered default or bare minimum standards of care rather than significant or informative. They are NOT the same as certified physical (phenotypic) health and DNA (genetic) testing by specialists. Additionally, many breeding programs that claim full health testing have done so for only a couple dogs, have only completed preliminary tests or have done only genetic testing. Do not be fooled! If you're not sure what you're looking for, ask for help.





Each breed has their own recommended health tests. Some can be found through a breed club website, though many breed clubs suggest fewer tests than the number of known diseases that plague the breed. A great example of a breed club clearly laying out required and recommended health tests (including prioritization) is the [Goldendoodle Association of North America](#). I'd love to see more clubs adopt this level of detail out in the open for potential puppy buyers to learn from.

It's my belief that breeders should proactively share the results of all major health tests for each breeding individual, ideally on their website or listing (green flag). If a breeder uses OFA, claims passing scores and provides the dog's registered name and breed, you can actually [look up the test results](#) yourself, because all passing hip & elbow scores will be publicly available. Just be aware the search function on the OFA website can be finicky. It may require searching for one breeder's dogs by different criteria than another's. Breeders are permitted by OFA to keep failed tests hidden from public view though. Some choose to not share the actual certificates on their websites (yellow flag) as they say it's possible for the documents to be stolen and doctored by scammers, but they should be happy to share proof of health testing privately with prospective buyers. Again, **do not take the breeder at their word** that they health test or that bred dogs had positive results. Additionally, think for yourself about what level of risk you're willing to accept or what potential trade offs you're willing to make. For example, if hip dysplasia is a huge deal to you because you want an urban running partner, you may seek breeders who select breeding dogs only with hips scored *good* or *excellent*, and choose to not breed dogs with *fair* hips, even if they don't produce the colors you hoped for. If you need to see for yourself just how prevalent poor health testing scores are by breed, [OFA statistics by disease](#) have you covered. In the below screenshot you'll see all hip testing data, the number of dogs tested and the percentage of those with dysplastic vs normal hips *at the time of their test*. Remember, these data only represent those dogs whose breeders cared enough to test them, and likely who were not showing blatantly obvious signs of the disease before testing. What do such high rates of dysplasia in this selective population say about the population of all purebred dogs?



HIPS				
Breed	Rank	*** All Data ***		
		# Evaluations	Normal %	Dysplastic %
OLDE ENGLISH BULLDOGGE	1	256	24.6	72.7
PUG	2	1,121	27.0	71.4
BULLDOG	3	1,334	28.5	70.2
DOGUE DE BORDEAUX	4	864	39.9	57.1
BRUSSELS GRIFFON	5	182	44.0	53.8
TOSA	6	101	47.5	50.5
NEAPOLITAN MASTIFF	7	248	46.0	50.4
ST. BERNARD	8	2,790	48.2	49.6
OTTERHOUND	9	584	49.7	47.3
AMERICAN BULLY	10	483	55.9	41.6
CLUMBER SPANIEL	11	1,334	57.8	41.5

Remember! Completed health testing does not mean that only ideal, healthy dogs are bred. Check results yourself and decide what risks you can accept.



There's one more health topic to consider. Many welfare-impacting problems with strong genetic influence can only be tracked by identifying affected individuals in a lineage. They cannot be tested for and we have limited understanding of how risk is passed on. But these are largely not discussed with potential puppy buyers, or are referred to as par for the course with certain breeds, as though it's not possible or worth it to breed away from these conditions. I'm referring to problems such as environmental and food allergies, chronic ear infections, epilepsy, certain cancers, dental disease and many more. While the level of inbreeding (often measured as **"COI" or coefficient of inbreeding**) has a clear impact on the overall health and vitality of individuals as well, the science is unclear at the moment regarding specifics of how high is too high and what that entails for specific dogs.

With some googling, by asking breed enthusiasts or speaking with your vet, you can identify any additional, lesser talked about health concerns you'll need to look out for. If these are mentioned on a breeder's website or they discuss it with you personally *before* you've given the breeder money, consider that a green flag. A breeder who is transparent about health risks present in their dogs' lineage, is far safer to buy from than one pretending these risks don't exist. In many pure breeds, it is not possible to find a lineage without one or more of these problems without frequently outcrossing to other breeds, but outcrossing is still frowned upon if not harshly penalized in much of the pure breeding world.

The health of your dog impacts your finances, their longevity, welfare and their long term behavior. Subsequently, it may impact your entire freedom of lifestyle. Verifying results and deep diving into the overall health of a breeder's program before committing is your best defense against a short-lived or long-suffering dog. Do not discount the importance of this step and don't accept explanations such as the eagerness or ability of parent dogs to work or play as sole proof of health.

### Example:

**Power Tripp Border Collies** details many health topics about which puppy buyers should be aware. They also offer information on lifespan and cause of death in past breeding dogs, valuable for those of us who want long healthspans, as well as lifespans.

I love how **Avid Aussies** proactively offers test results, coefficient of inbreeding, pedigree AND links to pages explaining each health test or condition listed. The codes under each of their dogs' orthopedic tests can be used to verify results with the advanced search function on the OFA website. This ensures direct transparency without a certificate, which may be doctored.





From OFA's page, first click *Advanced Search*, then use the third text box to enter individual test result numbers, or a CHIC number if you have it.

## Socialization and early life environment.

A dog's early life environment and experiences play a key role in who they have the potential to become as an adult dog. Puppies are far from blank slates, but the "nurture" side of nature via nurture (not versus) starts at conception, long before you as a puppy owner have any influence. Although this area of scientific research needs more study, we can make some solid statements.

1. A mother dog's physical health and emotional stress or distress impact the development of her offspring starting at least at conception if not earlier. A stressed mom puts pups at a higher risk of developing unwanted emotional problems like anxiety, fear, frustration intolerance and aggression.
2. Post-birth, a mother dog's behavior strongly impacts her puppies both in how she interacts with them (time spent licking or nursing, how she nurses, how gentle or tolerant she is) and how stressed or fearful she is in or about her environment. There have been experiments in multiple species using cross-fostering to parse out heredity from a mother's influence through her behavior. This means having genetically fearful offspring raised by confident mothers and genetically confident offspring raised by fearful mothers, with additional control groups, and measuring the differences in fearfulness of the offspring once grown. While genetically fearful pups raised by fearful moms had the most extreme behavior, genetically confident offspring also grew up to be more fearful adults if raised by fearful mothers. These experiments offer solid evidence that fearful mothers further influence the dispositions of the pups they raise, even after accounting for genetic differences.
3. A puppy's sensitive socialization period starts at 3 weeks of age and lasts until about 12 weeks, give or take a couple weeks depending on the breed and possibly the individual. This is a period of rapid brain growth during which pups are creating neurons and pathways between



neurons, documenting everything their experiences lead them to believe is normal, beneficial, safe or unsafe, both for future reference and to grow areas of the brain that are used (needed) more. During this time, puppies should be gradually introduced to a variety of sounds, surfaces to walk on, objects (especially those which move or make noise), unfamiliar locations, unfamiliar people, and unfamiliar dogs, as well as handling that will be necessary for grooming and veterinary care, in a way that ensures these experiences are remembered as positive. If for example, “exposed to children,” means puppies were manhandled or chased around, their experience may have been a terrifying or even traumatic one despite affectionate intent on the part of the child. A puppy with that *socialization* is potentially worse off than a puppy who has never met children but who has always been treated gently and respectfully by strangers. Puppies need the chance to move around, explore, interact and experiment with their behavior. Opportunities to explore and learn must start early in order to take full advantage of the brain's limited period of rapid growth. Even a great socialization program that doesn't begin until 6 weeks of age lacks the magnitude of beneficial effects of a program that starts earlier in development. It is entirely possible to safely get litters of puppies out in the world away from home, even in places where disease risk is high, by using tarps, vehicles, strollers, wagons, kennels and slings or puppy backpacks.



Precisely how puppies should be raised is a complex topic with no easy answers past the obvious: that a puppy mill or other setup isolated from human family and the broader world is not only limiting, but fundamentally alters the way that a puppy brain develops. In tests run by Dr. Karen Overall, the trauma of neglect, especially when the puppies are then shipped to urban pet stores, creates surprisingly consistent mental scars, measurable through behavior. The next question is then: what type of socialization program or regimen should a breeder follow to ensure their pups are as resilient as possible and ready for their future lives? Many breeders do not list any information about this at all and must be asked– a yellow flag. This may be an oversight, it may be because strategic, intentional socialization is not a priority to these breeders, or it may be because they don't have a





structured socialization plan at all. As a conscientious puppy buyer, you'll need to look for specific mentions about where and how puppies are raised, and seek photos and videos of their early environment, even if only available for previous litters. There are 3 commonly used puppy raising protocols to know, pieces of which are often mixed and matched as a breeder sees fit:

**Early neurological stimulation or ENS**, is the practice of introducing very mild sensory stressors to puppies at a young age, typically 3-16 days. This became popular thanks largely to an experiment by the US military, trying to produce working dogs who were more resilient in the face of extreme stress (eg. war) later in life. It's based on plausible hypotheses supported by some studies showing that mild stressors early in life, that puppies easily overcome, may help dogs learn to cope better with stress and difficulties later in life. However, the results of studies, specifically on ENS in dogs, have been mixed; details can be [read here](#). Generally ENS is considered a minimal risk and potential benefit. However, we know that the benefits versus negative impacts of stress can be tracked on a bell curve, with both too little and too much being bad for development. Meaning, a litter or even a particular individual that has been through some stress already, such as a complicated birth or sickness, *maybe* harmed by the additional stress of ENS, minimal as it is.

**Puppy Culture** is one of the two most popular commercially available socialization planning programs. This condenses the basics of puppy raising from primarily a behavior and training perspective into easy-to-follow developmental milestones that note what to start doing or teaching and when. The goal is to produce puppies who are more engaged with both people and their environment, making them better learners who are easier to train and more emotionally stable. This is a great way for breeders to ensure they're hitting their goals and at the correct times, but much of the content is actually also applicable to raising litters that come into shelter and rescue. A more detailed explanation of this program and how it was started can be found by listening to a podcast episode with the founder Jane Lindquist (Killion), [located here](#). As always, critical thinking is necessary. Not all the suggestions from Puppy Culture have solid scientific backing or are within the creators' expertise of behavior and training.

**Avidog Breeder College** was an excellent in depth course on not just socialization but virtually everything a breeder needs to know when raising puppies. It covered mate selection, whelping practices, supplementation, etc., and was designed to be evidence-based with input from multiple professions. The program is largely retired, though parts are accessible through breeder membership with Gooddog.com. One thing to note, however, is that the follow-up course Puppy College and some miscellaneous recommendations from the Avidog website also have no scientific backing. For example, the main founder suggested harsh punishment-based techniques for behavior suppression during delicate developmental periods, such as shaking a crate when a puppy inside whines or cries. Such advice can cause serious and permanent harm.

Overall, I consider the use of any of these a green flag, the sign of a breeder who cares and pays attention to early puppy development. A word of caution though! Some scammers claim to use one or both of the latter programs but do not. Look for evidence, such as photos or videos of the work breeders are doing with their puppies.



The most commonly lacking areas of socialization practices that I see are too few or zero trips away from home for litters, little to no time in public places, meeting and being touched by few unfamiliar people or none at all outside the family, *before* they're handled and poked by strangers at the vet clinic, and not observing or meeting *unfamiliar* or *unrelated* puppies and/or puppy-friendly adult dogs. This is a big deal for pets who will be living in urban areas– especially for pups raised by breeders who don't live in the city and can't utilize passive exposure to urban life at a distance on a regular basis. Puppies who get sick or are scared in the car can be far more difficult for owners to continue to socialize once homed. Even just a week of delay while vet care is sought for nausea and/or confidence during car rides is built in a scared pup, can make the difference between an owner scrambling to make up for lost socialization time, or countless layers of mental padding against negative experiences the pup will inevitably face. A breeder using

### Example:

[KleinHaus Swedish Vallhunds](#) does an excellent job of sharing videos and photos of the conditions their pups are being raised in, their socialization experiences and puppies' responses.

## What info can you gather first hand?

One of the best ways to obtain unfiltered info about who your puppy may grow up to be is by meeting their doggy parents and visiting the breeder's location yourself. Ideally, you should do this long before you can take a puppy home, so you have time to reflect on what you saw and decline or back out of purchasing a pup if warranted. Don't run the risk of noticing multiple red flags the day you pick up your puppy, once you're too attached or financially committed to change your mind. When inquiring about visiting, here's what you may find:

- Commercial breeding establishments or breeders knowingly cutting corners typically avoid visitors. They may push options such as shipping or driving the puppy closer to you and meeting you halfway in a parking lot somewhere. They may post pictures of puppies with limited or obscured backgrounds, or in a staged location only to avoid showing the daily living conditions in which pups are being raised. Often, CBEs and smaller scale breeders prioritizing profit don't show parents or adult dogs at all, in photos or videos. If they do, the location or angle of the photo usually obscures any visual info about living conditions in the background, or with the parents only visible to show off expected coat colors for instance.
- A breeder who doesn't allow visitors to their home isn't necessarily shady! Breeders may be concerned about disease transmission to puppies (though risk would be low with handwashing and shoe removal), they may value their family's privacy, they may have family members with high health risks post-pandemic or they may be breeding dogs of less trusting breeds whose stress elicited by visitors while pregnant or with pups could negatively impact the pups. Keep in mind, if visitors stress a mom dog out, is that the ideal temperament for your future house pet? Sure, it may be partly a temporary hormonal state, but how important is it to you that your dog is friendly? Is it worth the risk that hormones may simply be



exacerbating a heritable predisposition of distrust? Any breeder should be willing and eager to share the details of where and how pups are being raised, where the parents are housed, what the parents are like, and show you behind-the-scenes pictures and video. Some breeders are even willing to go the extra mile and video chat to show off parent dogs or where pups are raised. As their ability to alter or omit unflattering scenes or occurrences while live is minimal, these breeders get an extra green flag from me. Since great breeders of any given breed or mix can be few and far between, video conferencing technology expands options for people who cannot or would prefer to not make multiple long distance road trips for brief visits in person.

- Many breeders do not have all parent dogs in their program on site. This has always been common for sires (dad dogs), but is becoming increasingly common for dams (mom dogs) now too, typically in the form of "guardian" or "co-own" homes. These parent dogs do not live with the breeder but merely return for breeding and sometimes health testing or evaluations. This can lead to better welfare for the individual parent dogs, keeps the breeder's costs of caring for dogs lower without cutting corners, reduces the likelihood of oopsie litters with resourceful (i.e. desperate) male dogs living with females in heat, and diversifies the population of available dogs that can contribute genes to a breeding program– a plus for the overall health of a breeding program when done well. If a breeder doesn't have the breeding dogs with them, they should still be able and eager to share details about what the parents are like as well as recorded video footage and pictures. Although I consider the use of guardian or co-own homes to be a fantastic opportunity, pros and cons need to be evaluated on an individual basis. We may presume for instance that since a dog was raised in the breeder's home or facility, they feel comfortable, safe and happy in that location as an adult. However, the dog decides how they feel, not us. If a mother dog finds travel stressful and must travel to conceive, travel back home, then travel again well into her pregnancy, that's three stressors right there. Add on potentially navigating new social dynamics as adults, adapting to new routines, losing their loved ones (they don't know for how long), etc., all of which add an additional dose of stress hormones shaping the way their growing puppies' brains are developing. A guardian program for a breeding operation using a set up that resembles a boarding kennel is especially concerning to me. Boarding and kenneling is stressful for dogs even under the best and briefest of conditions.
- Some breeders offer Facebook groups for potential or confirmed puppy buyers to watch pups' develop, to see what socialization and preparation goes into raising litters, and to get familiar with the furry family. This can be a great way for breeders to educate, to connect with puppy buyers, and to foster more accurate expectations and preparation. The opportunity for continued contact once puppies are in their new homes, to share fun quirks or commiserate over frustrating experiences, as well as to offer temperament and health data to the breeder, is also often invaluable for breeders and puppy owners alike.

When scoping out a website, video chatting or visiting in person, ideally you should consult with a behavior pro to assist! But in the event you do not, what should you look for?

**Cleanliness**, with the understanding that dogs aren't always the most clean and careful or graceful creatures, especially dog moms whose nesting instincts ruin a carefully designed set up, or small





puppies creating their own chew-related enrichment. Immaculate conditions aren't a reasonable expectation and may not be ideal for pups anyways. But living and whelping areas should be largely clear of dirty wood shavings, dirty laundry, trash, peeling paint and so on. There should not be feces caked or smeared all over, it shouldn't smell strongly of urine, white dogs shouldn't be stained yellow or have clumpy discolored color fur, etc.



Ripped, dirty blanket on top of straw. Whelping box may be cramped. Although there are no overt signs of illness or injury, it's unlikely these pups are being raised inside a home.

**Preparedness**, such as back up supplies if the birth or puppies are trending poorly, if mom needs additional supplementation or help feeding, larger penned areas as pups are ready to explore more, materials for socialization (eg. toys that move or make noises, raised surfaces, different ground textures, small harnesses) and tools for hastening potty training, such as a low lipped tray off to one side with alfalfa pellets, artificial grass turf or hay. This also includes an ultrasound to get a sense for how many pups to expect, so emergency help can be sought if a pup is stuck. Understand though that you may not see everything and looks can be deceiving. For example, a fancy whelping box with side rails and reusable velcro pads that provide traction for developing motor skills are fantastic, but a cheap baby pool with a bunch of clean towels isn't necessarily bad, depending on breed size, risks, and individual moms. A breeder doesn't need to use high end materials or products to do an amazing job of caring for and raising puppies. If you aren't sure about something, ask!





**Condition of puppies & mom.** It can be tough for those of us without a veterinary degree to deduce much, especially if we're not there in person. But with a little effort, even a novice can spot things like patchy or unusually thin fur, runny eyes, rashes, scabs or pustules, crusty noses, prominent hip bones, shaking or quivering front legs, let alone more serious visible signs of injury such as open wounds, all of which are surprisingly common in profit-driven commercial breeding operations. If you see something odd, ask your veterinarian. Do NOT take vague or odd excuses from the breeder as truth. If you're seriously concerned, such as seeing emaciated or wounded dogs, contact animal control, the humane society, local community outreach programs that assist with the cost of vet care, etc. rather than simply buying a pup and ensuring the suffering of mom and/or future litters.





**Location of pups and location of breeder.** Are pups raised in the home with constant exposure to the sights, sounds and smells of daily pet life, or are they in a barn or separate kennel area with limited contact? This affects not only puppy development but mom's stress as well. Are they living in the city where pups may passively adapt to traffic noise and the sight or smell of sidewalk pedestrians, or are they out in the quiet unchanging countryside? Without considerable additional socialization effort, rural life may leave pups unprepared, overwhelmed and skittish when they move to the city.



**Parent dog body language & behavior,** especially their reactions to various stimuli and events. If visiting in person, do the dogs keep their distance for a while, shy away from or avoid hands, and/or bark in alarm with raised hackles and stiff body? Or do they greet you lovingly and immediately as though you're a long-lost friend? Do they startle or flinch at sudden noises or movements, avoid eye contact, and/or keep a lowered head and tail posture around the breeder? Or do they trot around gleefully with bouncy steps and a loosely raised tail? Don't accept excuses for guarded or skittish behavior such as "we rarely get visitors" or "they're feeling a bit off today", unless you're okay with these behaviors showing up in your future dog. After all, your own life may not turn out to provide consistently idyllic conditions either. Additionally, consider how the parent dogs' lifestyle may impact their behavior versus how your potential puppy would be living. A working or outdoor-only dog may hold the genetics for puppies who need a lot of exercise and stimulation and who are difficult to live with as city pets, even if the fulfilled parent dog you meet seems calm in that moment.





### Example:

[Austerlitz Shepherds](#) offers a blog post detailing their main areas of litter preparation in hopes of helping new or aspiring breeders, complete with a worksheet.

## Understanding body language, behavior & training.

Breeders aren't necessarily behavior or training experts, and that's okay. But some foundational knowledge of how dogs learn and the ability to read basic body language has big implications. Ideally, breeders consult professionals who are both knowledgeable and more objective.

- A breeder who doesn't understand body language may choose to breed dogs struggling with mild to moderate fear and anxiety, thereby producing pups who are also likely to struggle. Most often I see this as appeasement behavior or reassurance-seeking, which is often misinterpreted as friendly sociability.
- A breeder who uses training and management based on startle, intimidation, fear, discomfort, or even pain may stress the mom during pregnancy and after birth. This is indirectly detrimental to healthy puppy development and may also affect the tone of the breeder's direct interactions with the puppies.
- Breeders may be unable to accurately describe the temperaments of their dogs. For example, they may describe a dog's personality as *dominant* rather than recognizing discomfort around other dogs, may use the term *high energy* for an anxious hypervigilant dog, or conversely claim their dogs are *calm* rather than recognizing physical or emotional problems causing





dogs to refrain from proactively interacting with their environment or from expressing species-typical behavior.

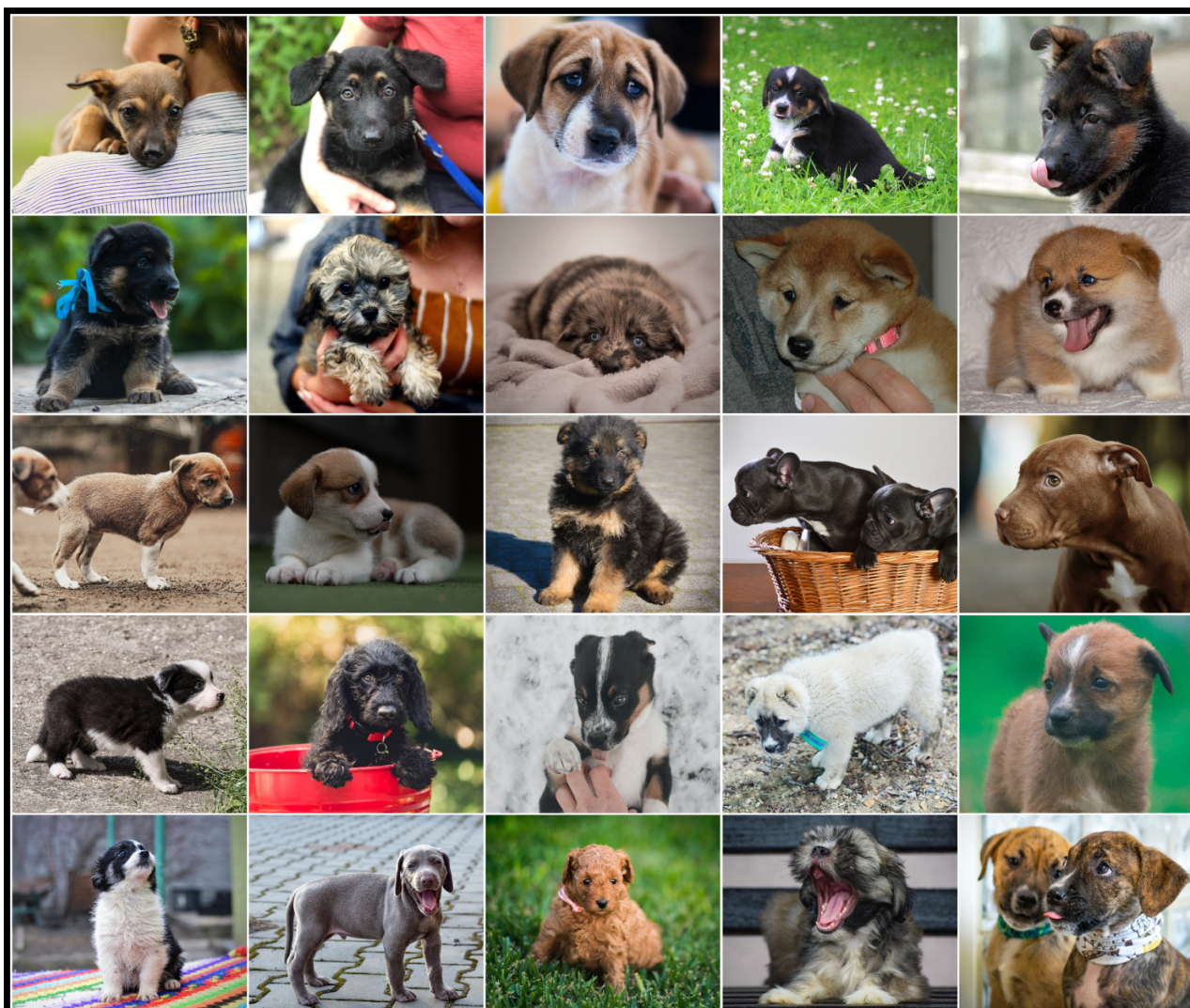
- If breeders are familiar with only one breed or one type of dog, they may also develop a skewed perception of what is typical, normal or desirable, and differ from the average pet owner in these definitions. "Good temperament" is far too subjective to have any real meaning, but even an individual dog described as *low energy* likely means different things to a working Jack Russell terrier breeder and a show Newfoundland breeder.

Once again, this is a complex topic. Here's what to focus on:

**Training methods:** do they talk about rewards based or positive reinforcement training (green flag), relationship based, naturalistic or no mention of training at all (yellow flag, need more info), or do they use balanced training with prong collars, shock collars, choke chains, slip lead, or paracord collars (red flag)? Do they talk about being alphas or pack leadership (red flag)? Some breeders will claim that their specific lineage *must* be trained with aversives to be safe or successful. While this is untrue, I must also point out the ethical flaw in intentionally breeding animals who can only be successful members of society if under constant threat of scary, startling or painful punishment. Note though that in the AKC show ring, dogs are not allowed to wear common flat collars or harnesses. A breeder may use what appears to be a slip cord, slip lead, or an extra thin choke chain for these events despite understanding and using rewards based training.

**Body language** can be evaluated in the pictures and videos a breeder shares. These are only a snapshot in time and do not give us a detailed picture of a dog's overall temperament or welfare. However, a breeder who proudly shares photos of stressed or anxious-looking dogs as their best examples is showing that they either do not understand body language or do not prioritize displaying the comfort and stable temperaments of their dogs. In my experience, this is painfully common not just on puppy mill broker type websites, but even on the sites of many smaller or newer breeders who seem to legitimately care about their dogs. For example, on a pet golden retriever breeder's site I saw a photo of a 6 week old litter hiding flat on the floor under an exam table at the vet clinic being presented as humorous. This is concerning fearful behavior from pups of a friendly and trusting breed at what should be a highly inquisitive and sociable age. The number of photos showing parent dogs with fully tucked tails, ears back and avoidant or cowering postures is, at times, disheartening to say the least. If you haven't practiced reading body language, check out my [blog posts](#), [Instagram](#), and [Facebook page](#) for tips. [www.iSpeakDog.org](http://www.iSpeakDog.org) is another great resource. See the last page of this guide for the key cues to note in the following collage.





Every one of these puppies is displaying body language consistent with fear, anxiety, discomfort or stress. Can you identify them all?

Carefree Canine  
Breeder Selection Guide

**Specific behaviors** of related dogs. What are parent dogs or adults from previous litters like in various environments and on a day to day basis? Information about dogs within a specific *lineage* is far more important than breed! Don't expect a puppy will be friendly and easy to socialize just because they are a Labrador retriever, as selecting for those traits may not have been enough of a priority to a specific breeder for it to hold consistently true in their puppies. Make a list of the most important traits you want and need out of a dog, including factors like "trusts and enjoys greeting unfamiliar people," "playful and social with unfamiliar dogs even past social maturity" (2-3 years of age) or "unbothered, not distracted or startled by busy city noise and traffic while hanging out at a cafe patio." Look for breeders whose dogs and/or puppies from previous litters are consistently living that lifestyle successfully and with reasonable training and socialization effort. One relative who is a service dog does not guarantee that other dogs from that lineage will be anywhere near service dog potential. That one dog may have been a significant outlier in the program. One dog in a lineage may





be a successful therapy dog, but perhaps that dog's owner is a social worker allowed to bring her pup to work every single day, attended multiple puppy classes before 16 weeks of age, field trips to pet friendly stores for multiple hours every weekend. Perhaps with anything less, that pup and related pups would be unsuccessful.

Dog trainer Hannah Branigan has a wonderful saying that I'll paraphrase to end this section. *Before you get your puppy, assume everything is due to unalterable genetics. After you get your puppy, assume nothing is.* In other words, there's a lot to be said about what late socialization and training can do for changing behavior, and once we have a puppy we should throw all our effort into socialization and preventative training. But when searching for the right breeder, we always have limited information and can't predict our own futures either. We need to make conservative estimates about how much impact we'll be able to have relative to the dog's genetics. This is how to increase the chances of ending up with a dog truly well suited to our lifestyle and abilities.



Normal puppy behavior is playing, exploring, chewing and tugging, rather than remaining consistently quiet and "calm."

## **Titles are important information.**

Titles are 3rd party certification of accomplishments between dogs and their handlers, often allowing a few letters to be placed before or after a dog's name, similar to how people with a PhD earn the title of *Doctor*. Titles are frequently considered to be a vital indication that a dog is worthy of being bred and therefore a breeder is making responsible choices. The implication, with which I disagree, is that a breeder must then be irresponsible if they're breeding untitled dogs. Let's start with what types of titles you may see:

**Conformation show titles** were originally used to judge how worthy a dog was of being bred by comparing their outward appearance and on-leash movement to the written standard for the breed. A dog with show titles can be expected to look a certain way, have particular physical structure we can see or feel and potentially move a certain way. Now that conformation is more of a sport than a



breeding evaluation, this isn't necessarily the case. Competitors commonly hide faults with chalk (coloring) or trim fur in certain ways to change the impression of the dog's physical structure. Networking and reputation is often considered vital to success regardless of the dogs. Being a dog handler, the person in the ring showing the dog off to the judge, is almost as much of an art and science as the breeding that shows were intended to measure.

***Titles based on working performance and instinct*** are meant to measure aptitude of a purebred dog for the job they were historically bred to do. These include field trial titles for working gundog breeds like retrievers and spaniels, herding trials for precision herders like border collies and Australian shepherds who move sheep or ducks, earthdog tests for breeds like terriers and dachshunds bred to hunt critters in burrows underground, and lure coursing trial & test titles for breeds like greyhounds and whippets who visually track and chase prey at high speeds. We can expect a dog with one of these titles, especially at higher levels, to have a particular suite of behavioral responses and inclinations that helped them earn these titles. It may be possible to train a border collie to hunt prey underground and a dachshund to herd sheep, but it would be far more work for us and less intuitive for the dogs than participating in the tasks for which they were bred. At higher levels, they'd be less competitive and less likely to win points towards titles than dogs selectively bred for the behavioral and physical traits that allow those dogs to excel.

***Dog sports*** offer titles in agility, rally, flyball, obedience, dock diving, scent work, tracking, schutzhund/IPO and more. These are similar to working and instinct-based titles in the sense that certain dogs will be better suited to, or have an easier time being trained for, and therefore more easily acquire points in some sports over others. Dog sports are based a little more in fun and games than working function, and they tend to be more open to a wider variety of breeds and levels of interest. Like in human sports, some people can be fiercely competitive, while in other areas and venues you might find more relaxed people who consider the sport an occasional hobby. Many lines of dogs are bred specifically to excel at a particular sport. These dogs may be just as intense, with exaggerated behavioral tendencies, as more traditional working dogs. Other "sports-lite" dogs are bred to be easy pets first and foremost, while maintaining enough enthusiasm, athleticism and biddability to do reasonably well in sports.

***Other miscellaneous titles*** include canine good citizen (CGC), therapy dog and trick dogs. While these are great for demonstrating how much interaction a dog has with people, the value of these titles is negligible in predicting the kind of temperament the dog has, let alone what traits they may pass to their puppies. For instance, one dog may receive intensive management and training for a year or more to overcome enough fear, anxiety and/or reactivity to accomplish their CGC in a single half-hour test, while another dog may have an easy time adapting to new situations, needs only a couple weeks to learn the specific behaviors tested, and is ready not only to test but can recall that learning for years if prompted and reinforced.

Titles are really good information about what traits, both positive and those that should give you pause, may be passed on to your potential puppy, so it's important to look up what the letters behind a dog's name mean.





- The parent dogs who earn titles typical of their breed may create pups better suited to lifestyles that are more dog-centric than the average pet family wants. They may indicate that pups will need frequent structured or well planned training, daily or constant environmental management to prevent natural instincts from causing harm, hours of enrichment and exercise to deter restlessness destructiveness or noisiness, or extra management to prevent frantic frustration when encountering interests they cannot reach (eg. seeing prey run past while on leash). On the other hand, titles that require more competition or specialization may be difficult to obtain with dogs who are more broadly social, moderate to low energy, comparatively lower mental or physical endurance but emotionally flexible and overall well-suited to the average pet household.
- Many available titles are earned through and recognized by the AKC. The AKC requires all dogs not of a recognized breed be irreversibly sterilized to participate. The AKC only recognizes the purity of certain breeds and only certain lineages or pedigrees within those breeds. This means dogs of breeds that aren't recognized or lines with outcrossing for health, diversity or function, cannot earn certain AKC titles before breeding. Some sports or events are also only open to particular pure breeds.
- AKC events are sometimes held by and populated primarily with people who only support pure breeding and consider intentionally mixing breeds to be irresponsible, reckless or even abusive. At these events, mix breeders may be harassed, bullied or discriminated against, making their attempts to earn titles or have fun with their dogs, more stress than it's worth. This is especially true for doodles, which you can learn more about from the [3 part doodle series in this geneticist-hosted podcast](#). Luckily, this is less common in sports run by other organizations. In certain sports like flyball, intentionally bred sport mixes are actually the second most common competitor, just barely behind purebred border collies.
- Even for purebred dogs, certain titles can take multiple years for dogs to achieve, depending on the amount of competition and their breeder's access to the events– even more so during and after the fallout of a pandemic. While a slightly older stud may not be a problem, there's an age (varies by breed) at which the risks of keeping a female intact and breeding her start to outweigh the benefits of waiting. It may be unfair to expect that certain or multiple titles on a mother dog will be earned before she's bred, and it may be classist to expect all responsible breeders to be able to devote many thousands of dollars and hours in travel and entrance fees alone, considering it may not even benefit their breeding program or their dogs.

I consider titles a green flag in general, as a sign of a breeder who is willing to invest time and money in the physical and/or behavioral health of their dogs, and works with, values and knows their dogs individually. Titles not only tell potential puppy buyers which parents may produce puppies better suited for them, but which may not. The opposite is not also true however. A lack of titles does *not* mean a breeder doesn't invest in, train with or value their dogs individually. A lack of titles also does *not* mean their dogs haven't proven themselves worthy of being bred, especially for pet populations.



### Example:

The level of detail that [JungerSohn Rottweilers](#) offers regarding the adult dogs in their program, from accomplishments and health testing to photos throughout the dogs' lifetimes, demonstrates the pride and love they have for their adults!

## What goals do a breeder's website or Facebook page convey?

There are numerous reasons someone may choose to breed. Considering the time that should go into raising resilient puppies (including time that must be taken off from traditional jobs), the cost of supplies, health testing, potential stud or travel fees and ongoing extracurricular veterinary care and testing for reproductive health, it's no surprise that most breeders who prioritize their individual dogs and/or a breed population don't actually make money, even when charging over a thousand dollars per pup. A breeder who does make a little profit from one litter might lose it all to a pup with a medical problem in the next litter, or spend it raising their next potential breeding dog to adulthood, only to get news that the last of their dog's health tests resulted in a failing score and they must start over. So while it's possible for breeders to make ethical choices and also make some money, breeders or breeding programs which prioritize money tend to be on the unethical side of the spectrum as they must scale up production, scale down the costs of or time spent on care. But we don't always know what's going on behind the curtain, so what clues can we gather?

**USDA license: yellow flag.** The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is a federal agency responsible for the growth of and laws pertaining to farming, forestry, rural economic development and food. Currently, to my knowledge, a dog breeder must be licensed with the USDA only if they have at least 4 breeding females (no specific definition) or if they sell dogs to buyers without the breeder, buyer and puppy all present (any location). There are good breeders who hold a USDA license out of necessity, so this is not a red flag alone. But touting the license and [USDA inspections](#) as an indication of how legitimate or responsible they are is a common tactic used by puppy mills and their brokers to prey on people who don't know what the USDA regulations entail, let alone how they are pitifully enforced, if at all. If a breeder, pet store or website pride themselves in this, be suspicious and look harder. I would share how to seek inspection reports from the USDA, but they are notoriously unreliable and the full reports (with "teachable moments") are difficult to obtain. If you're looking for a responsible breeder, USDA records are largely useless.

**Pushing/selling a particular supplement or diet: yellow flag.** There are numerous claims out there about particular diets or vitamin brands being not just good but vital to the development and lifelong health of dogs. Some companies seem to target breeders as a way to more easily sell their product. Once again, I don't have an issue with breeders making a little money on the side. However, when breeders make bold claims about the efficacy or necessity of supplements and diets, especially those they sell, this starts ringing alarm bells. For evidence based information about diet, seek info from those with credentials such as a Masters or PhD in canine nutrition, or much rarer but better yet, a certified veterinary nutritionist. [Linda Case](#) has multiple evidence based books, a blog, great online webinars and self paced basic nutrition courses. [WSAVA](#) has limited usefulness to owners in my



opinion, but has some good points to look at when selecting a food. [SkeptVet](#) has some fantastic breakdowns of the evidence for and/or against various supplements and the supplement industry as a whole in his blog, as well as [a book](#) that includes a section on diet misconceptions. Consider that if a breeder is suggesting a particular diet to avoid allergies, or requires a particular brand of vitamins to prevent deficiencies, are they really breeding naturally healthy dogs?

***Willingness to take a puppy back or help rehome at any age: green flag.*** Ethical breeders care about the puppies they're raising and that care doesn't end just because the puppy is no longer living with them. They don't want their pups ending up in shelters, rescues or being dumped on family/friends who can't care for them, so will ask or even mandate that puppies be returned if the owner ever needs to rehome or relinquish their dog. This can be a huge inconvenience to the breeder, a good sign they care about the dogs more than money or other goals.

***A waiting list or wait time to purchase: green flag.*** Breeders who are focused on profit, getting puppies out as fast as possible to make sales, generally have far less wait time than those breeding for other goals. If a breeder has lots of puppies from various litters available at all times, this is a huge red flag. If they have a wait list, green flag. Anything in between, doesn't provide enough information to come to any conclusions.

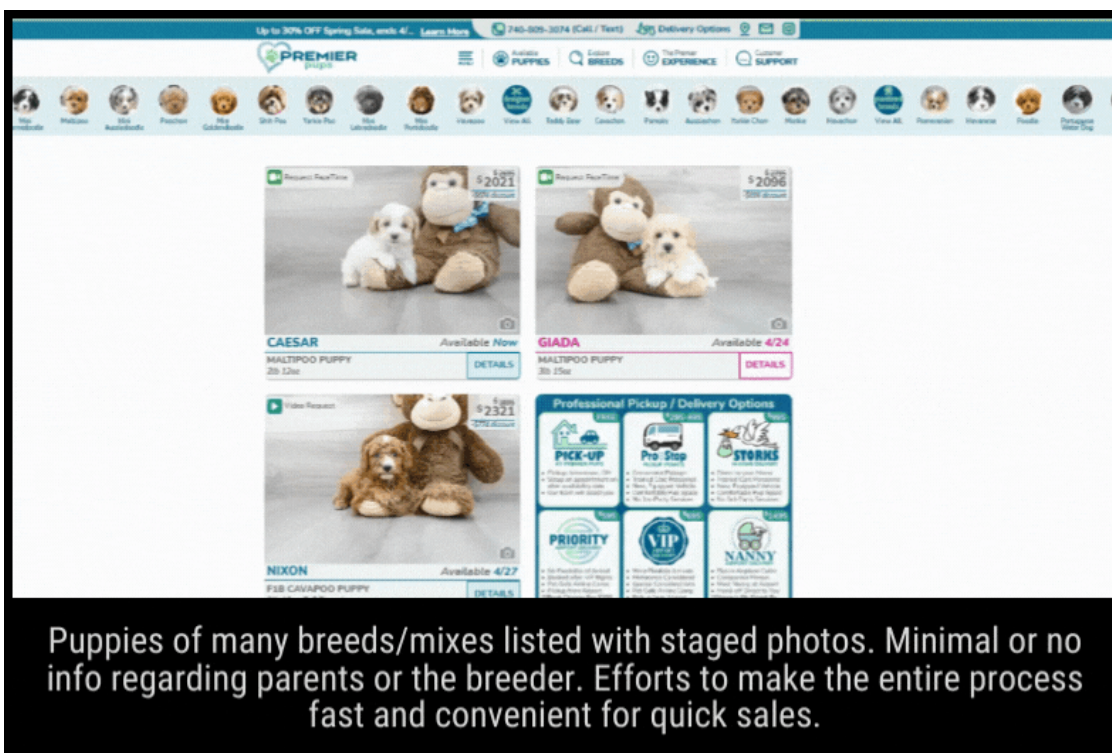
***Breeder picking your puppy for you (or limiting your choice based on temperament): green flag.*** Puppies are individuals. Even purebred litters will have some variability in physique and temperament. While highly controlled studies on puppy temperament tests have not as of yet been able to predict the working success or personalities of puppies as adults, it's plausible a breeder may have a better chance of predicting which puppy would fit each type of home compared to a prospective owner who's spent little to no time with them. This is another barrier to purchase, rather than making the process a quick and easy transaction. In other words, a sign that a breeder is trying to do right by puppies and families rather than prioritizing profit. Because of the poor predictability of puppy temperament and the fact that some litters will be bred for homes all with similar lifestyles, I don't have a problem with breeders allowing owners to choose puppies. Regardless of who chooses, ideally the determining factor is more than a single, inconsequential criterion such as coat color.

***Breeding volume,*** meaning how many dogs and how many litters the breeder is caring for, especially at one time, is very important. The smaller an operation is, the more intimate the breeder's knowledge of individual temperament may be, including both the dog's struggles and strengths. It's also easier to keep a small number of dogs as valued household family members rather than outside, in large but isolated barn runs or small indoor kennels for 16-24 hours a day. When it comes to tracking development and giving individualized socialization and training experiences to small puppies, can you imagine how a breeder with multiple litters at a time, perhaps with breeds producing 10+ pups per litter, could possibly do so? What would their field trips away from home look like for those pups? How could they know if a particular puppy needed more cautious socialization experiences due to nervous reactions, if a pup was getting bullied and needed extra support, etc.? I don't have a definitive number for ethical breeding volume, but as the number of litters per year increases, so does my skepticism. Multiple litters per month, every month, year round, is red flag territory for pet dog operations.



**Health guarantees** in the contract should not carry stipulations about specific brands of food, supplements, or require a *lack* of vaccines or other veterinary care in order to be valid. Some health guarantees offer only a refund or replacement if the sick puppy is returned to the breeder. As someone who has owned dogs with serious health concerns, there was absolutely no chance I was giving a puppy up to whom I'd claimed and bonded with. I think this is at very least an odd requirement, while at worst a cruel or predatory mandate in order to receive any sort of compensation or assistance. A good breeder should want to stay in contact and should want to know how pups are doing, both physically and emotionally. Not only because they care, but also because they need these data to make future ethical breeding decisions.

**Website layout/look:** not all legit looking websites are run by ethical or even small scale breeders. There is, however, an unmistakable look to a commercial puppy broker website. Puppy after puppy will be listed with minimal info, typically with staged-only photos and offering multiple breeds. A breeder's website should be a destination to learn about their breeding goals, breed(s) or mix, their puppy raising processes and especially the adult parent dogs and relatives from their program, in detail! It should not resemble a fast food menu with ready to go options from unknown sources. For examples of broker websites, the antithesis of ethical breeding or transparency, look at Next Day Pets, Premier Pups or Petland. Similarly, if a Facebook or Instagram page primarily or only has photos of puppies for sale, this is a yellow flag. If the page has zero photos or information about the parents of litters, not even buried deep in the page's history, and any polite questions about health testing or parentage are met with silence or "I'll pm you," this is a red flag in my book. Breeders should not only be happy but proud to show off the health, emotional stability, welfare and abilities of the dogs in their breeding program.





### Example:

[Kessel Run Icelandic Sheepdogs](#) shows off how much fun their parent dogs have and the accomplishments of adult dogs in the family, not just pups!

## Factors I'm not (as) concerned about.

You may be thinking there are a few big topics I haven't covered, but that are widely considered vital proof that a breeder is responsible. I'll cover a few here.

**Registration or "papers"** are shorthand for a *service to breeders* that helps track pedigree (lineage) and allows owners to compete in certain events. Club registration does not imply let alone prove anything about the health or quality of puppies produced. As a service to breeders, there's no need to enforce anything. The process is on the honor system, therefore is easy to fake and another common tactic used by commercial breeding operations and brokers to garner trust from unknowing buyers.

**Pure breeding** is commonly considered the ideal, even the *only* ethical way to breed. However, it's becoming increasingly obvious that strict, highly related and homogenous populations struggle to support long term health and vitality. Intentional mixed breeding, including long term outcross programs for pure breeds, is likely (hopefully) the way of the future. As some people point to fads driving large scale production of irresponsibly bred mixes, I would argue it's just as easy to find irresponsibly purebred dogs en masse. As an added layer of complexity, I question the ethics of continuing to produce pups of many pure breeds as they are, knowing the array of health problems that are incredibly likely to occur and cause suffering in pups, but which could be solved with outcross programs. This includes certain [breed standards which specifically call for behavioral or physical traits that compromise wellbeing](#). I'm absolutely *not* against pure breeding. Rather, I'm pointing out that while this is a nuanced topic, mixed breeding is not the mark of unethical practices as is so commonly believed. Not even doodles!

**Breeding a single breed**, rather than multiple, is another commonly believed necessity to prove ethical practices. I applaud and admire those enthusiasts who dedicate much of their lives to the history and attempted preservation of welfare-compatible breed traits. However, not everyone who breeds just one breed holds that deep knowledge, nor can it be said that someone who adores multiple breeds can't know as much or make as sound breeding decisions. There is an order of magnitude here, however. It is of course more plausible that someone is putting in the time and effort to track pedigrees, cultivate knowledge and make sound breeding choices for 2 or 3 breed lineages, versus 10 for example. Again though, this concept seems to be rooted in the belief that pure breeding is the ideal and anything else produces dangerously unpredictable frankendogs. In reality, it is possible to responsibly breed for temperament, health and general physical type without placing emphasis on breed *at all*. The [Bosun Dog project](#) and others are already doing this, and these were the conditions that led to [certain landrace breeds](#).

**Bettering the breed** or **preservation breeding** are common phrases along the lines of the last two points. In addition to what I've already covered, I also question how ethical it is to treat dogs as museum pieces to be preserved rather than accepted as the diverse mammals they are, or at very least recognized as living beings that deserve the best quality of life possible being prioritized over



purity. We're talking about a population of living breathing beings, not a factory producing carbon copies of a product. Pure breeding offers a lot of benefit in terms of predictability or consistency, and as I mentioned in the initial section, the heart wants what the heart wants. But if the heart doesn't happen to want tradition or conformity, that's hardly unethical.

## **Additional signs of ethical breeding practices.**

**Detailed form and interview: green flag.** Again, any barrier to purchase means a breeder is choosing outcome over profit, which is good. This particular barrier is extremely important to enable a breeder to know to whom their puppies are potentially going. It can assist them in putting puppies into homes with responsible and loving owners, and keeping dogs in their original homes as often as possible by setting good expectations, as well as coaching and supporting new owners. Ideally, you'll be keeping your breeder up to date with how your puppy is growing and what they're like behaviorally and medically, well into adulthood. This is your opportunity to ensure you can develop a comfortable, long term relationship with your breeder as an individual.

**Contract clauses against breeding or requiring spay/neuter: green flag.** Some commercial breeding operations are against their dogs being bred too, but many do not care. Good breeders absolutely do not want to contribute to the overpopulation of dogs bred under less than ideal circumstances.

**Outcross program support or participation: green flag.** Outcross programs are not the same thing as mixed breeding for other purposes or for no specific purpose at all. Outcrossing is a carefully planned process to bring genetic diversity to a population in the hopes of bringing health, longer life, larger litter size and easier birthing/whelping. Breeders doing extensive research, taking initiative (ideally but not necessarily with the support of their breed club), and braving the judgment of their peers to improve dog welfare, are truly heroes for dogs. See the [Chinook Breed Conservation Program](#) as mentioned above, as well as the [Bernese Mountain Dog Vitality Project](#), [LUA Dalmatians](#), and the [Doberman Preservation Project](#).

## **Using this information.**

In case you haven't noticed, finding the ideal breeder is a lot of work! This guide has been written with pet owners in mind. It is *not* a comprehensive list of everything a breeder faces or navigates in order to breed responsibly. In fact, the breeding world is fraught with challenges, many of which come from public perception of breeding in general being inherently unethical.

**Take notes!** Actually write down or type out what your wants and needs are in a dog. What are top priorities, what are wants but not needs? Keep track of which breeder websites or listings look promising, and compile a bunch before taking a closer look. List the pros and potential cons of going with one breeder over another.



**Respect breeders' time.** Do the work you can with the info that's available, to better identify if a breeder is a good fit before speaking with them. If you reach out to a breeder, don't expect them to answer 20 questions directly that could have been answered by reading their website.

**Understand that perfection isn't possible.** Whether it's their website, breeding practices, communication style or the dogs themselves, nothing in life is perfect! Signing up to be wholly responsible for an intelligent and emotional creature's needs for hopefully 10 or more years, should not be taken lightly. Knowing that our dollars and endorsements nudge the health and stability of the dog population as a whole, we should do our diligence to support breeding practices that do no harm. But there is a limit to how much time a breeder has in one day, how many areas of expertise they can hone and how much control they have over the messy process of biological reproduction. All dogs will have behavioral challenges, all dogs are likely to get sick at some point in their lifetime and all breeders are human.

**Above all, be kind.** When you do reach out to your breeder, remember that they are also evaluating if you are a good fit not only for their puppies but to have a long term relationship with them. Good breeders want to stay in contact for the life of their puppy. They want feedback on their puppies' health and temperament. After pouring so much time and love into a litter, they want to know that their puppies are living a good life. Rather than asking about price or grilling a breeder right out of the gate, offer some info about yourself and why you're interested in their pups. When you do ask questions, be mindful you're not phrasing them in an accusatory way. No one is on trial, you're just gathering information.

By carefully and realistically analyzing our wants and needs, doing our homework before we begin looking for a furry family member, and being willing to keep looking until we find as close to perfect a fit for us and our lifestyles as possible, we increase the odds that all of our family members will enjoy a higher quality of life.

## Additional resources.

**[The Functional Dog Collaborative](#)** - an organization started by a DVM and genetics researcher that provides education for breeders and consumers. It especially seeks to reach breeders facing barriers (such as mixed breeding stigma) to other sources of support. With a study summary library, podcast and Facebook group for discussion, their content is evidence-based and absolutely fascinating if you're a genetics-loving nerd like me.

**[Puppy Seekers](#)** - this Facebook group was originally an offshoot of the FDC. A safe place for people seeking to get a new puppy can learn, ask questions or seek additional help in vetting breeders. Those who already have their puppy and are willing to share their experiences, are also welcome.

**[Fact or fiction: Uncensored Opinions of Breeders](#)** - a Facebook group that is most useful if you have a specific breeder in mind and want crowdsourcing help to ensure you're not missing important info (like particular health tests) or falling for a scam that only breed enthusiasts would know about.





[The Institute of Canine Biology](#) - as with any source, it's important to think critically for ourselves. If you would like to deep dive into breeding topics though, and have no idea where to start, this blog is a fantastic place to start, with plenty of scientific references to launch your rabbit hole expedition.

[Puppy Culture](#) - for a variety of resources that may benefit your puppy or the puppies you work with. Their offerings are not strictly for breeders!

[Puppy Socialization: What It Is and How to Do It](#) - a book on utilizing your pup's sensitive socialization period, by two phenomenal dog people. You spent all that time reading this guide, don't squander the socialization process once you get your puppy home!

## Photo Credits

Puppies in a shopping cart: Kristy Francis of [Kristy Francis Dog Training LLC](#)

Cavalier mom & cavapoo pups: Liz Maslow of [Comfort Cavaliers](#)

## Puppy Body Language Collage Key:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Tense face</li> <li>✦ Ears back</li> <li>✦ Cowering into the neck and shoulder</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Wide eyes</li> <li>✦ Raised eye brows</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Wide eyes</li> <li>✦ Raised eye brows, pulled together</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Ears back and drooped</li> <li>✦ Eye whites</li> <li>✦ Tongue flick</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Ears sideways</li> <li>✦ Nose lick</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Tense and leaning body</li> <li>✦ Ears back</li> <li>✦ Eyes wide</li> <li>✦ Panting or about to yawn</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Wide eyes</li> <li>✦ Ears back</li> <li>✦ Low head</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Wide eyes</li> <li>✦ Ears back</li> <li>✦ Cowering into the blanket</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Tense mouth &amp; eyes (shape)</li> <li>✦ Ears drooped</li> <li>✦ Cowering into the person</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Tense and wide posture</li> <li>✦ Ears back</li> <li>✦ Eye whites</li> <li>✦ Panting or about to yawn</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Tense posture</li> <li>✦ Ears back</li> <li>✦ Eye whites, looking without turning head</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Ears to side and drooped</li> <li>✦ Eye whites</li> <li>✦ Nose lick</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Body leaning back</li> <li>✦ Ears back</li> <li>✦ Eyes wide</li> <li>✦ Tense mouth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Wide eyes, whites</li> <li>✦ Ears back or side &amp; drooped</li> <li>✦ Low heads</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Ears back</li> <li>✦ Round eyes</li> <li>✦ Whites, due to low head turn</li> <li>✦ Tense face</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Tense body, leaning back</li> <li>✦ Ears back</li> <li>✦ Eyes round, whites</li> <li>✦ Tail &amp; head low</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Wide round eyes, whites</li> <li>✦ Ears to side &amp; drooped</li> <li>✦ Low head</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Ears pinned</li> <li>✦ Tense brows &amp; eyes, whites</li> <li>✦ Pawing and licking to intercept hand</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Head low</li> <li>✦ Tense brows &amp; eyes (shape)</li> <li>✦ Indirect gaze</li> <li>✦ Tense posture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Ears back</li> <li>✦ Tense brows &amp; eyes (shape)</li> <li>✦ Indirect gaze</li> <li>✦ Tense mouth</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Small posture</li> <li>✦ Ears pinned</li> <li>✦ Eyes round</li> <li>✦ Tense mouth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Tense posture</li> <li>✦ Ears back</li> <li>✦ Yawning</li> <li>✦ Tail low</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Tense, wide posture</li> <li>✦ Ears back</li> <li>✦ Indirect gaze</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Tense posture</li> <li>✦ Yawning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Wide eyes, indirect gaze</li> <li>✦ Ears drooped</li> <li>✦ Tongue flick</li> </ul>

