Are You SURE You Should Get a Dog? By Wendi Lau

Dogs are cute and affectionate. They complete the happy, All-American family picture. But does your life really have space for a dog and the full commitment of dog ownership?

Parents of newborn babies must suddenly handle sleepless nights, endless feedings, diapers, throw-up, and crying. Adopting a puppy is similar, including making a lifelong commitment to care for a creature that has outgrown its cute stage. Dog owners must be responsible, caring pack leaders despite work, fatigue, or other commitments. An honest assessment of your lifestyle may change your mind about getting a dog.

Every year, [thousands](https://www.americanhumane.org/app/uploads/2016/08/petsmart-keeping-pets-phase-ii.pdf) of dogs are returned to animal shelters within weeks or days of being adopted. Reasons include barking, bathroom issues, and destructive behaviors. Increase the chance of making the right pet decision for your family by being aware of the hurdles: time, commitment, care (tasks), and money.

Time. Very young puppies need lots of overnight care and attention – frequent feedings, trips outside to pee and poop, and comfort when it misses the presence of its mother and litter mates. Someone in the household should be able to handle these duties. College, new job, young children in the house who also need care and attention – this is not a good time to get a dog.

Not a puppy? Daily tasks that will also take up time include walks twice a day of 45 minutes to one hour, teeth brushing, nail filing (weekly is okay if using a nail cutter), feeding, and play. The walk is the most important, most neglected thing. “Walking your dog is a primal activity. It is hardwired into her brain to migrate with her pack…Every cell in your dog’s body is crying out for a walk,” opines dog psychology expert Cesar Millan. “The walk is the foundation of your relationship. It is also where a dog learns to be a dog.” Clearly, the walk is important for a healthy, happy dog.

Altogether, these daily tasks add up to 2-3 hours of dog care. Regular baths, vet visits, and flea, tick, and heartworm treatments equal more time and money. Most people are spending their extra 2-3 hours a day on devices or watching TV. A Tamagotchi (virtual digital pet on a key chain from the 1990’s) is more appropriate for those who cannot give that up.

Now, consider that time commitment for 14 years, a dog’s average lifespan. Every day, through sickness, unemployment, break-ups, moves, kids growing up, and marriage, a dog owner must be completely committed. No skipping walks or teeth-brushing. Inadequate exercise and discipline can lead to boredom, an unhealthy weight, misbehaviors, destruction, aggression, and neurosis. It takes all four people in my household to do all the doggy tasks. They would rather pet and play with her than walk and brush her teeth. Dogs are social animals, happiest with their pack. A responsible dog owner should provide all its needs.

Dog ownership is not cheap. Topical flea and tick treatments cost about $100 per year. Dog food is $100-$300 a year. Dog shampoo, crate, brush, leash, collar, chew toys, food and water bowls, dog bed, choke chain, and a basic dog obedience class. Vet visits after the first year are $500-$1000 annually, even more for the puppy year. Purebreds sometimes need special diets (pricier dog food) and have breed-specific health issues requiring more vet visits. According to thesprucepets.com, expect a yearly total of $1,400-$4,300, with an average monthly cost of $115-$350. Students at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine estimated the puppy’s first year had an average cost of [$3,085](https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/lifestyle/did-you-know/cost-to-raise-dog/), while the average cost over a dog’s lifetime was $23,410. Larger dogs cost more due to more toys, more poop, more shampoo, more everything! The Spruce Pets’ upper average annual estimate equals $60,200 over a 14 year lifespan!

Why so much stuff? Why not wing it? If you have read this far, you are forewarned about the commitment, time, and expense of dog ownership. It is not a surprise. This dog will help you be healthier, happier, more responsible, outgoing, and longer-lived. The least you can do is live up to your commitment and take good care of this animal that loves you with all its little doggy heart. It is a big, life-altering decision. If you still believe that you and your family can take care of a dog, good for you and good luck!

If you adopt from the Humane Society or a rescue shelter you are probably saving a life. Read or listen to at least one of Cesar Millan’s books before you do. I recommend *Cesar’s Way*. By committing the patience and time to reading a dog psychology book, you are showing the maturity and responsibility required to seriously consider dog ownership. Please, please commit to two more things that will make the world a better place: spay or neuter your dog and pick up its poop!

Doggy Questionnaire to a Human

Please answer these questions after you have carefully, and honestly thought about your lifestyle, family, and budget.

Do you have 2-3 extra hours every day to:

* Walk me twice a day for 45 minutes-1 hour EACH TIME
* Brush my teeth
* File my nails (weekly if using a nail cutter)
* Feed and water me
* Play with me

Can you bathe me every week