

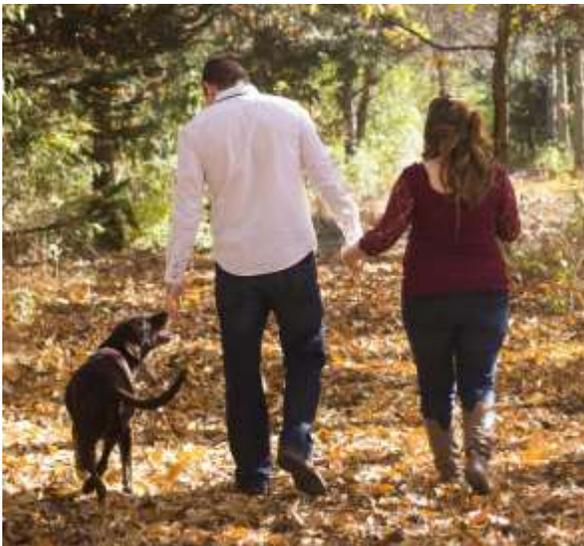
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Can We Talk About the Idea Family Dog?

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The swift, intense demand for dogs in North America during the COVID pandemic came as a surprise to many of us who already shared our lives with canine companions. It was as if the whole continent suddenly experienced a visceral need to experience the comfort of this species that has shared a relationship with humans for millennia. Shelters were emptied of adoptable dogs, and breeders were overwhelmed with requests.

As dog aficionados for decades, we watched this movement with intense interest. How will it play out? Will people be able to obtain the cheer and contentment they are looking for? Will these dogs

become family members who share their joie de vivre with their new humans for 10 years or more? We fervently hope so.

We also began to think more about what those searching for a canine family member deserved to gain from this new relationship. What do we all wish for in a dog? This is our list of the characteristics of an ideal canine family member:

- **Temperament:** Stability, reliability, confidence, trainability, with low risk for aggression to dogs or people
- **Behavioral health:** Ability to fully participate in their human family's lives and activities but can be left at home without objectionable or destructive behavior
- **Physical health and longevity:** Reasonably good day-to-day health without chronic health issues, from allergies to GI issues to orthopedic pain, and to live at least 10 active years
- **Structure:** The anatomy and physiology needed to participate in their family's/owner's lives and dog-appropriate activities without pain or discomfort

This last item, canine structure, is an important constellation of physical features of which many people have minimal knowledge. Because dogs have such plastic genetic characteristics, humans can and breed dogs, and dogs can interbreed themselves, creating the most structurally varied mammal on earth. Who would believe that the Dachshund and the Irish Wolfhound are not only the same species, but also both bred originally to be hunters?

As a result of this incredible variation in structure, dogs can be comfortable and healthy in their bodies, or not. And that comfort relates directly to temperament, behavior, and physical health. Each one of us has experienced the discomfort of being ill or injured. When we are uncomfortable, we often get irritable, even angry, and sometimes act irrationally. Dogs that are uncomfortable may experience personality changes, including lower thresholds for aggression, decreased interactivity, and increased fear or anxiety. They certainly are less interested in being trained or joining in activities. Dogs usually recover mentally and behaviorally from short-term discomfort related to an injury but long-term or even lifetime discomfort from disease or structure can affect dogs deeply. Because dogs hide pain and discomfort so well, we may not even recognize it in our own dogs. Often, we can perceive resulting behaviors as flaws in character rather than having a physical cause. This judgement erodes our relationship. At times, it may even contribute to a dog losing its home.

As a result, it seems imperative that we bring the topic of canine structure to the forefront of our minds and discussions about dogs. It should not just be the purview of breeders who seek to create dogs that win in the conformation ring. Instead, all breeders, whether they breed for conformation, performance, or family dogs, and all people seeking a new companion should be familiar with what constitutes healthy canine structure that provides the physical foundation for temperamentally and behaviorally sound dogs that live active, healthy lives.

For a more detailed explanation about structure and how it affects function, check out the following recently published paper by Chris Zink and Marcia Schlehr: Working Dog Structure: Evaluation and Relationship to Function. *Front. Vet. Sci.*, 20 October 2020 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fvets.2020.559055>. Although this article focuses on the ideal structure of working dogs, the same principles can be applied to defining healthy structure for the family dog.

As more and more of us turn to dogs for comfort and love during this crazy time, let's dig into a conversation about the characteristics required of the consummate canine companion because they work in concert to produce the amazing animal that so many of us want in our lives today.