

What I Wish I Had Known...

Hindsight is 20/20, and life with dogs is no exception! While sometimes that means regrets, it also means there's opportunity to learn and grow.

I was 19 when I got my first dog of my own. I was dog walking for a rural shelter and, with very little forethought (to be honest, none at all!), I adopted a leggy scent hound named Arlo. Unlike rescues of today, the shelter had no screening in place to find out whether he was a good fit for me and my lifestyle, nor whether I was a good fit for the dog. So much could go wrong! Luckily for me, Arlo was a lovely and forgiving dog and, on reflection, there's so much I didn't know that I didn't know.

If I could do it all over, here's what I would change:

Start Training Classes Right Away - Whether You Think You Need Them or Not!

Rescues today often have mandatory training requirements on higher needs dogs, or at least a list of recommended trainers. I wish I had been pushed to get into classes right away! Like many dog owners, especially those with a background with animals, I thought I knew what I was doing. Little did I know that "self-taught" isn't a real thing! Even the most experienced professional trainers continue to seek out new skill-building opportunities, something I wish I had done as soon as I adopted Arlo.

Seek Out Positive Training

Had I been better prepared and researched, I would have known that hounds have a hard-earned reputation for being difficult to train off leash. After a few too many jaunts through the neighbourhood where I was racing after him, I was talking to staff at a local pet store, and she referred me to a trainer who she was being mentored by. This trainer used very harsh methods and tools and, not having researched alternatives, I believed what he told me was necessary to train my new dog off leash. Had I done some research and sought out positive training early, I could have avoided damaging my relationship with my sensitive new hound!

Just Because Someone is Outspoken Doesn't Make Them Knowledgeable

The pet store clerk was very outspoken about the benefits of their chosen training method and used scare tactics to push me away from a kinder approach to training. I encountered similar views at the dog park, where the biggest personality appeared to be the most knowledgeable "amateur dog expert" in the park. But a big personality and persuasive words have nothing to do with how much a person truly knows about a topic!

Today we see not only "big personalities" that monopolize the training talk in the dog park, but also "big personalities" in the form of "social media influencers" who make videos to increase their following and increase the monetization of their page. The best way to do that is to release dramatic videos and inflammatory rants. Harsh training methods fit in perfectly to a format that thrives on drama and dysregulation. Social media didn't exist like it does now (hello, MySpace!), or I'm sure my 19-year-old self would have fallen for that, too!

Nature is as Important as Nurture

Another damaging fallacy is the “Nature versus Nurture debate.” It has never been a question of “either/or,” but actually of “both/and.” Nature, the in-born qualities of a dog, is equally as important as nurture, how a puppy is raised and trained. The implication of this is that, when you buy a puppy, you are not buying a “blank slate” or an infinitely malleable creature. Socialization is crucial, but it is also not the only or most important factor at play in creating the dog your puppy grows into.

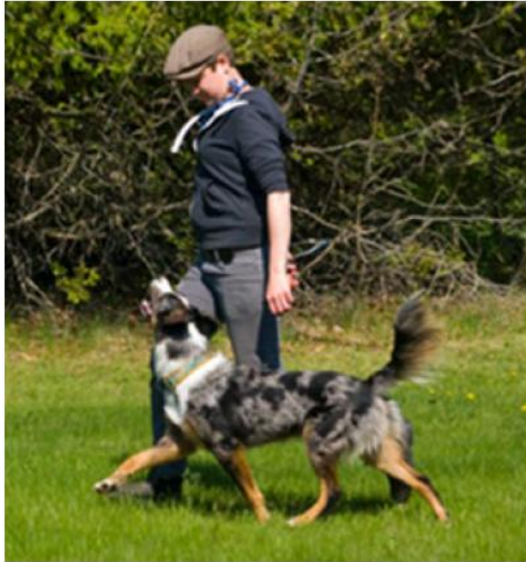
Learn About the Type or Breed You’re Sweet On

Jumping off from the “nature vs nurture” debate, let’s look at dog breeds and types. Sometimes we can fall for a type of dog because they are just adorable - but is that really the best reasoning for which to buy an animal you’ll be living with for the next decade or so?!

Dogs have been bred for different activities, and what they were bred for can make them more or less suitable for different households. While there is, of course, variation within a breed or type, it is still an important consideration when looking at bringing an otherwise unknown dog into your home.

When I adopted Arlo, it didn’t even cross my mind what the implications could be of getting a dog that is famous for their huge voice. I was extremely lucky that Arlo was one of those exceptions to the rule, he was the quietest hound I’ve met. If he’d had a typical hound voice, I can’t imagine what the next decade of renting housing with him could have looked like. More than once, a landlord shied away when they found out I’d be moving in with a hound!

I was so lucky that I ended up with a forgiving dog for my first dog and, in hindsight, see how much I relied on his goodwill to make up for the mistakes that I didn’t even know I was making. I also realize that so many of my clients are exactly where I was then! I love nothing more than when a client reflects on how their beliefs shift and change as they become increasingly open to learning new ways of living and interacting with their dog. Despite how familiar dogs are, and how deeply embedded they are in our culture, there is still so much to learn!



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