

R is for RESPONSIBLE

—by Donna P. Noland

Courtesy of The Alabama Canine Coalition, Inc.

Just what is meant by the term "responsible owner?" We hear it all the time, but oftentimes are confused about the exact definition. What does being "responsible" include when connected to the ownership of an animal?

As defined by The Random House Dictionary the word responsible means:

1. Answerable or accountable, as for something within one's power or control.
2. Involving duties and obligations.
3. Being the cause or reason of something.
4. Liable or fulfilling a duty.

Starting at the beginning, a responsible owner gives thought to owning a dog before ever getting one. He does his "homework." If he has never had a dog before, then the best place to begin would be to learn about dogs in general. What do dogs need to be good companions? What makes a dog a dog? What must a human provide to be assured that his canine companion's needs as a dog will be met? For example, dogs are social animals and therefore do much better as part of a "pack." It makes little difference to them whether that pack is made up of humans, other dogs, or a mixture of both with a cat thrown in for good measure. To a dog, being all alone is very often a "punishment" and can be very stressful.

Consideration is given as to whether a mixed breed is the dog for you. Or would a purebred dog be a better fit? Researching breed characteristics is important regardless of the answer. Knowing that some breeds are bred to guard, some to hunt, and some to sit in a lap gives insight as to what kind of personality you may find in a mixed breed dog as well as the purebred. Thoughtful reflection is a plus and will help identify the type of dog that will fit best with a person's lifestyle, activity level and family composition. You also need to think about what your expectations are in having a dog. What exactly do you expect your dog to do for you...with you...without you?

Being a responsible owner means considering your dog's needs as well as your own.

The decision as to type of dog, size, age, etc. has been made and it's time to go out and get it. What now? What sets the responsible owner apart from the other, maybe impulsive, kind? This is where the "Responsible Laundry List" comes in to use.

The Responsible Laundry List:

- 1. Buy from a reputable breeder or adopt from a well-run shelter or breed rescue.** This does not include buying puppies or dogs out of the back of a truck in the WalMart parking lot or from the local mall pet store. It does not mean buying a puppy from a newspaper ad because it was "cheap" or "free". People who breed or rescue dogs responsibly are ALWAYS concerned with the health of their dogs, their temperament, and the homes the dogs are going to. If the person you are dealing with is none of those things, you need to find someone else. Quickly.
- 2. Find a good veterinarian if you don't already have one;** someone you can establish a good rapport with and someone who is comfortable answering your questions and working with you to help you take excellent care of your dog. This may mean interviewing or changing vets until you find the right one. Annual trips to the vet will be needed. Yes, even if you think there's nothing wrong. There probably isn't. But your dog will need a wellness check-up at least once every year to make sure. Heartworm and flea prevention start here with testing.
- 3. Set up a safe containment system for your dog.** This can vary depending on the dog and on you. Physical barrier fences are generally considered the safest for your dog and for you. However, in the right circumstances with the right dog and with the right amount of effort on your part, invisible fencing (IF) can sometimes be a viable option. Just remember that IF containment systems do not keep others (dogs, people, wildlife) out of your yard or away from your dog. And very independent dogs are known for ignoring totally any shock if they have a strong enough incentive to leave.
- 4. Learn what the grooming needs for your dog will be and either learn to adequately do it yourself or find a competent groomer who works with all breeds.** Should you be getting a poodle or terrier breed or even a poodle or terrier mix, you may want to make sure that your groomer understands the grooming requirements for them, as grooming those breeds are much more specialized. Having consistently clean, parasite-free dogs is not an option. It is a must if you are a responsible owner. Your dog will stay healthier and happier and your house will stay cleaner.

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5. Plan to spay or neuter your dog at the appropriate age if it has not been done already and if you are not planning on being involved in activities that require an intact dog, such as conformation showing. Rescued and shelter dogs will already be spayed or neutered before you get them in most cases. If adopting or rescuing a puppy, initially it may be too young for the surgery. Beware too early spay or neuter. It is possible that complications can endanger the health of puppies who undergo pediatric spay/neuter, as well as contribute to later health problems as the dog matures. Your vet or your breeder will be able to tell you the right age at which to schedule the surgery for your dog. Also beware too late spay or neuter. This could cause an unwanted pregnancy and puppies that have not been planned for.

If you are buying your puppy from an established, responsible breeder, she or he will probably request that you sign a contract which requires you to spay or neuter by a certain age. Registration papers are often withheld until proof of the spay/neuter is given to the breeder.

6. Learn to be a good dog-owning neighbor and citizen and teach your dog proper manners so that it, too, becomes a well-socialized dog citizen. This actually includes several things.

Understand that just because you love your dog to pieces doesn't mean that every other soul you interact with will, too. Be acutely aware of whether your dog could be considered a "nuisance". All dogs bark. But barking incessantly at leaves falling from the trees does nothing to endear you or your dog to the neighbors. Dogs that roam and turn over garbage cans or dig in flower beds not yours or chase the neighbor's cat or dog will find themselves reported and picked up by Animal Control. And, you, as its owner, will be paying fines for this type of behavior. Repeats could very well lead to the impoundment and death of your dog. Dogs that chase cars will eventually meet their demise, to say nothing of the wrecks they may cause by drivers swerving to avoid them before that happens.

Practice good manners yourself. When you walk your dog, pick up the poop. Nobody likes to step in dog poop, no matter where they are. When you take your dog to a dog park, monitor your dog's behavior. If he begins to bully other dogs or becomes unmanageable, know when to leave or at least remove your dog from the situation. Learn the proper way and place to use a retractable leash. Educate yourself first; then educate your dog.

7. Keep only the number of dogs that you can care for well. For most people, this is probably one or two dogs. For some, it may be three or four. For a very few, this may be a kennel full. Be sure that you have the resources of time, money, stamina and desire to properly care for any animal, whether it's one or ten, that you bring into your life and your home. Responsible owners know their own limits and stick to them.

Responsible owners control their dogs.

Obedience training is a given. Responsible owners understand that training is not just about teaching a dog to sit, come or stay, although those are all very important things for dogs to know. Training is a way for an owner to build a relationship... a bond...with his dog so that they can better understand each other and live in the world together peacefully and happily. At no other time in history has this been so important.

As the human population grows, cities and towns and villages and even little sleepy country cross-roads are becoming more dense with buildings, people, cars and all the other things that go along with modern-day life. Gone are the days of wide-open spaces, except in the most remote areas. Gone are the days when dogs, cats and kids roamed neighborhoods, hills, valleys and playgrounds safely. Timmy and Lassie don't live here anymore. The world is a much more dangerous place—a more "condensed" place—for them and for us all. It requires more instruction from us in how to live well together. To keep our animals safe, we must be more diligent in teaching them how to navigate our society successfully. We must be more willing to protect them from themselves and from any who would purposefully hurt them. They are dependent on us for this, just as our children are dependent on us to teach them how to grow up.

Responsible owners understand that it is only through being good stewards of the animals in our lives that we will be able to continue to enjoy their love for us and us for them.

In the final analysis, it's easy to know who the responsible owner is and how to be one. It's the owner who pays attention; knows his dog; and really works at making himself and his dog welcome in any situation, any environment, with anyone.
An educational public service message courtesy of The Alabama Canine Coalition, Inc. For more information, please visit our web site at www.alabamacaninecoalition.org