



A FREE RESOURCE · R+R CANINE CONSULTING

Before You Bring a Dog Home

An honest guide for families considering adoption — especially families with an autistic or neurodivergent member.

Adoption can be a wonderful fit for both a family and a dog. It can also go painfully wrong for both when the match is rushed. These questions are here to help you slow down, ask what matters, and choose well, for your family and the dog alike — because a good match has to be right for both.

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START HERE

A companion dog is not a service dog

This single idea changes everything about how you choose.

Service dogs are carefully selected and trained over years to perform specific tasks and to stay calm under pressures most pet dogs never face. They are expensive, and the waitlists are long — which is exactly why so many families adopt a companion dog instead.

That can absolutely work. But it means the dog you bring home **has not been screened** to tolerate sudden noise, grabbing, or unpredictable movement. So the goal of this guide isn't to help you find a dog who will *fix* or *manage* anything. It's to help you find a dog who can be genuinely content in your home — because a dog who feels safe is a dog who can be gentle, patient, and trusting.

Two welfares, one decision

This guide rests on one principle: **the welfare of the dog and the welfare of the person matter equally, and have to be weighed together.** A placement that's wrong for the dog is wrong for your family too — fear and stress surface as the very behaviors families dread. We never protect one at the other's expense. When the match is right for both, everyone can thrive.

How to use this guide

Work through **Part 1** together as a family, then read the **Part 2** section that fits your child. Bring your honest answers to the shelter or rescue — a good organization will help you find the dog whose temperament truly fits.

How to use this resource · for shelters, rescues & autism organizations: please share, print, and hand this out freely — in adoption packets, info sessions, or alongside a consult. You're welcome to co-brand the editable version. It's here to start honest conversations and support lasting matches, not to replace a personalized behavior assessment.

THE METHOD BEHIND THESE QUESTIONS

Seeing the whole dog: L.E.G.S.

A simple way to understand any dog — and why behavior is never just one thing.

Every question in this guide grows from a framework called **L.E.G.S.**, developed by applied ethologist and canine behavior expert Kim Brophey. It reminds us that a dog is shaped by four forces at once. When you understand all four, you stop asking "is this a good dog?" and start asking the better question: "is this dog a good fit for *us*?"



Learning *their history*

Everything this dog has experienced and learned so far — in past homes, a shelter, or on the streets. It shapes what they expect from people and the world.



Environment *their world now*

The life around them today — your home's noise, space, routine, and daily rhythm. The same dog can thrive in one setting and struggle in another.



Genetics *their wiring*

What the dog was bred to do. Instincts like herding, guarding, or chasing don't switch off in a pet home — they shape how a dog naturally responds.



Self *the individual*

This particular dog — their unique temperament, sensitivities, age, and how they're feeling. No two dogs are the same, even within a breed.

Every question that follows is really asking the same thing: does this dog's L.E.G.S. fit our family's real life? When the answer is yes, almost everything else gets easier.

Questions to ask first

Before breed, before "cute" — start with your real life.

☐ **What does a real day in our home sound and feel like?**

Be honest about noise, activity, and how often plans change. A dog who needs calm and routine will struggle in a loud, fast-changing home — and a high-energy dog may overwhelm a quiet one.

(Environment)

☐ **Which adult will be the dog's main caregiver and advocate?**

A dog needs a steady adult to anchor to and to speak up for its needs. Your child can love the dog deeply, but cannot be responsible for it.

☐ **Can we give the dog a safe space the child cannot enter?**

Every dog needs somewhere to rest and reset, completely undisturbed. This is not a luxury — it is non-negotiable.

☐ **Are we ready for the dog's needs to sometimes conflict with our child's wants?**

Your child may want to hug; the dog may need space. Someone has to protect the dog's "no" so trust can grow on both sides.

☐ **Do we have the time, money, and patience this dog will need?**

Daily exercise and enrichment, vet care, and possibly training or behavior support. A settled match is built over months, not days.

☐ **Are we choosing a real, individual dog — not a breed reputation?**

Meet the dog more than once. Ask what the staff or foster has actually seen: noise sensitivity, how it handles touch, its history and known triggers. *(Self & Genetics)*

☐ **What is our plan if it isn't working — for the dog, too?**

A responsible, compassionate plan made in advance protects everyone, including the dog. Hoping for the best is not a plan.

What changes for your family

Your child's profile shifts which dog will actually thrive with you. Find the one that fits — or share more than one with the shelter.

If your child is non-verbal or minimally speaking

What changes: your child may connect through movement, sound, and touch rather than words.

LOOK FOR a dog who reads body language well, stays relaxed around sudden or unusual sounds, and tolerates touch — while still having clear ways to step away.

BE CAUTIOUS OF dogs who startle easily or are noise-sensitive, and dogs who only accept gentle, predictable handling.

ASK THE SHELTER How does this dog respond to loud or unexpected sounds? How is it when approached without warning?

If your child is high-energy, hyperactive, or impulsive

What changes: fast movement, running, and sudden grabbing are simply part of daily life.

LOOK FOR a dog who is slow to get excited, hard to wind up, and genuinely unbothered by chaos and motion.

BE CAUTIOUS OF herding and high-prey-drive dogs, who may instinctively chase or nip at a running child — this is instinct, not aggression. Also avoid dogs who feed off fast, loud energy.

ASK THE SHELTER What gets this dog excited, and how quickly does it settle again afterward?

If your child has mobility needs or uses equipment

What changes: wheelchairs, walkers, crutches, and slower or unsteady movement are part of the home.

LOOK FOR a calm, deliberate dog that is comfortable around equipment, and the right size — sturdy enough not to be fragile, gentle enough not to knock anyone over.

BE CAUTIOUS OF dogs wary of wheels or equipment (common — always test it), strong jumpers or pullers who could topple someone, and very small dogs who become a trip hazard underfoot.

ASK THE SHELTER Has this dog been around mobility equipment? How does it move in tight spaces?

Other profiles worth naming to the shelter: a tendency to wander or bolt (secure fencing and reliable containment matter more than the dog here), a strong need for sameness and routine, or sensory-seeking that craves deep pressure. Name your child's specific needs out loud — a good match starts with an honest conversation.

Adoption is the beginning

Even the right dog needs time to settle. These four pillars guide the first weeks and months.

Safety & Trust. Let the dog feel safe before you ask anything of it. Trust is the foundation everything else is built on.

Individual Understanding. Learn *this* dog — its signals, its limits, its joys — not dogs in general.

Environmental Healing. Set up your home so the dog can succeed: a safe space, predictable routines, fewer surprises.

Gradual Integration. Go slowly. Let the bond between your child and the dog build at the dog's pace, never forced.

Always supervise interactions between dogs and children — no matter how trusting and easy things become. Supervision protects the relationship you're building.

Every dog deserves a home where it can thrive. Every family deserves a dog who fits their real life. These questions won't guarantee an easy match — but they'll help you walk in with open eyes and a kind plan.

Free to share · please pass it on

Want to go deeper? Listen to **Under the Same Roof**, Jennyfer's podcast on living with dogs in neurodivergent households — the real version, not the heartwarming one. Made for autism and ADHD families, on Spotify.



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Behavior & wellness assessments, welfare- and trauma-
informed support for families and their dogs.

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