

Pit Bull, Retriever, or Mutt?



Dear Connie—

My husband Rich and I had a wonderful golden retriever, Melody, who died recently. We want to get another dog, but we have been arguing a lot about what kind to get. Rich wants to get a pit bull, because he wants me to be safe when he's traveling,

which he does a lot. Our kids (2 boys, age 3 and 6) want another retriever. I just want to go to the shelter and rescue a dog that really needs a home; a mutt would be fine. How do we resolve this?

Sincerely, —Christina

Dear Christina,

That's an interesting dilemma. Though I've always had dogs, I'm not a dog expert. But I'll do my best to help you make the wisest choice.

First, consider the dog you just lost. What were Melody's best traits? Did she have any major flaws? Golden Retrievers are generally known to be friendly, good with kids, energetic, and eager to please. It might be a good idea to have each person in your family remember the best and worst things about

Melody. Write them down, the pros and cons of getting another retriever.

I understand Rich's desire to keep you safe. Pit bulls can be quite effective guard dogs. They tend to be loyal and protective, so there's always the chance that a pit bull will be aggressive, and not necessarily when you want it to be. Because they were bred for years to fight other dogs, under certain circumstances a pit bull—even one that has been a good family pet—will turn on someone, possibly a child. There are many tragic stories about this kind of thing happening. A large proportion of dog attacks and dog-related deaths are caused by pit bulls. Ask yourself, and Rich, if the protection a pit bull might offer is worth the worry that it might go after a child, a neighbor, or another dog.

So consider the basic categories of dogs. Some, like border collies, are working dogs. They need a job, and if you don't give them one they'll create one—like tearing around the house, trying to round up your kids or your cat. They are very smart, and if you have sheep, or someone in the family



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wants to learn agility, perfect! Otherwise, they can be a handful.

Some dogs are bred for hunting, some for guarding, etc. It's important to choose the breed that best fits your family's needs and desires. Check the AKC breed standards for a reliable way to know what to expect from any breed you are considering.

Rescuing a dog from the shelter is a good-hearted thing to do, and many rescue dogs turn into superb family pets. I've done it in the past, with mixed results. The important thing is to learn as much as possible from the shelter about the dog's history and breeding. Many times there isn't much information available. But ask if there's a known history of aggression, incessant barking, running away, or ill health. Has the dog been mistreated? Does it show evidence of basic training, i.e., "sit, stay, come, no"? Spend as much time as you can with the dog before bringing it home, and if you have doubts about whether it will be a good fit for your family, better to wait. Dogs are usually with you for a long time, and a mistake can be costly in many ways, including taking a toll on family harmony.

When my husband and I lost two dogs within a year (a chocolate lab and a terveren) we spent a lot of time on web sites looking for a breed that would best fit our needs. My husband's highest priority was a working dog, which was fine with me. My highest priority was a friendly dog, one that I would not have to worry about with other people or dogs. After a long search, we decided to get a bearded collie—a friendly, smart working dog breed, and beautiful, too. We now have two, and they have been wonderful in every way—well, they do need a lot of grooming! ■

Good luck finding just the right dog, Christina.

Blessings, — Connie

Do you have a psychology question?

Connie Myslik-McFadden is now offering sessions in person and by phone from Bozeman and leads regular groups and workshops. Call Connie at (406) 582-7450 or e-mail: mtlionlady@gmail.com. E-mail sent to Connie is read only by Connie and will be held in strictest confidence. No identities will be published. **Disclaimer: The responses to questions in this column are for information only. Never disregard professional advice or delay seeking it because of anything you read here. Working with a skilled professional is highly recommended.**

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