

ver of dog generations, combined with the careful record-keeping associated with pedigree animals, means that it is relatively simple to follow the course of genetic problems. If a dog has a particular inherited disease, it is easy to identify all of his cousins, and even his second and third cousins, once, twice and three times removed.

At the start of 2006, the Irish Kennel Club introduced compulsory microchipping by breeders of all pedigree puppies. This means that all pedigree dogs are now bar-coded with a unique 15-digit number, easily retrieved by waving a wand-like scanner over the dog's back. The resulting data is stored on a central database. This will make it easier to track genetic problems in Irish pedigree dogs in the future.

This may be interesting and useful for dog breeders, but for ordinary families choosing a dog today, simple questions need to be answered. What should a puppy-shopper do to minimise the risk of acquiring a dog with problems? Overall, pure-bred pedigree dogs are often the best pets to choose, because the size, appearance and temperament of the adult animal is much more predictable than the unknown potential of a mixed-breed dog.

However, the unavoidable downside of all pedigree dogs is the increased risk of inherited diseases. To minimise this risk, you should ensure that your new puppy has parents that have been screened in the appropriate way for their breed (for example, X-rays of hips have been done and eyes checked). Contact the Irish Kennel Club to ask about the screening programmes for a particular breed.

You should also ask the breeder if you can meet the mother and the father of your puppy. If both parents are healthy, good-natured individuals, there is a higher chance of your pup turning out well, although this does not remove the need for proper genetic screening. A good-quality pedigree dog does not come cheap: expect to pay between €400 and €1,000, depending on your choice of breed.

For financial and other reasons, many people still choose a cross-bred dog. Thousands of unwanted dogs are destroyed every year in Ireland, and it can be rewarding to give a home to such an animal. You do need to be aware of the potential problems involved in rescuing a dog. An adult dog from an animal sanctuary may have been rejected by its original home for many reasons, both physical and behavioural. Check with the sanctuary that they will give you support if you run into difficulties that you cannot handle.

If you choose a cross-bred puppy, it is often difficult to meet both parents, but do at least try to meet the mother. The upside of a cross-bred puppy is that it is less likely to develop inherited diseases than a pedigree

animal. The downside is that the adult animal will be much less predictable than a pedigree dog.

So is there a place for designer dogs? To increase the predictability of the adult version of a puppy, a cross-bred pedigree dog can indeed be an excellent idea. But you don't need to choose a trendy made-up breed with a cute-sounding name. Ask around locally, at vets and animal rescue centres. Find out what puppies are available in your area, and if there happens to be a cross-bred pedigree litter of pups, they could be the ones for you. If the pedigree parents have been screened for inherited diseases better again.

Finally, whatever you choose, take your new arrival to the vet as soon as possible. If a problem exists, you may be advised by the vet to send the puppy back to the breeder. If small, cuddly creature has been in your home for a week before you discover the problem, there is little chance that you will be prepared to send him back to an uncertain fate. Inherited problems such as heart murmurs and hernias may be invisible to owners, but can have devastating effects on the future health of the dog. It is important that they are identified as soon as possible. As well as checking the physical condition of the young animal, the vet will also give you good basic advice on caring for the puppy.

If you are reading this and thinking "why bother with all the trouble of a dog", remember the words of Rudyard Kipling, which apply to every dog, regardless of its breeding: "Buy a pup, and your money will buy love unflinching." ♦

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Meet the parents (bottom of page, from left): Border collie and English springer spaniel cross; pug and Shih-Tzu cross, and sheltie and dachshund cross. Above: Labradoodles: Labrador and springer spaniel mixed breeds. Photographs: Jane Burton

DESIGN A DOG

- Labradinger** – Labrador and springer spaniel
- Labradoodle** – Labrador and poodle
- Cockapoo** – Cocker spaniel and poodle
- Peekapoo** – Pekinese and poodle
- Shih Poo** – Shih-Tzu and poodle
- Schnoodle** – Schnauzer and poodle
- Dorgi** – Dachshund and corgi
- Bordaxy** – Border terrier and dachshund
- Bug** – Boston terrier and pug
- Chiweiner** – Chihuahua and dachshund
- Gerchowder** – German shepherd and chow-chow
- Puggle** – Pug and beagle
- Chowggle** – Beagle and chow-chow
- Shih Pom** – Shih-Tzu and Pomeranian

