



Assessing Your Litter

Before you even mated your bitch, you will have had a set breeding goal in mind – maybe it was to breed a pup to show, breed or compete with. Perhaps you had requests from other breeders for a puppy to help further their breeding programs, or maybe you had several wonderful homes waiting for a new pet. Potentially a combination of all of these.

From the minute they were born you will have been watching and assessing your pups – observing their temperaments as they develop, looking at how the pups are coloured and marked, how they carry themselves, and how they are constructed. During this high growth phase of their lives, pups change almost daily. They may grow at different rates, so it is not uncommon for the puppy that looked amazing one week, to look awkward and uninspiring the next.

After spending so much time with the pups, you will no doubt have your favourites! One of the biggest skills of any breeder is being able to find the best puppies in the litter – the ones that best match the breed standard. Assessing your litter takes quite a bit of objectivity. Although they will all seem utterly adorable, you need to be able to stand back and be honest about the merits of each pup and the quality of the litter as a whole.

Get opinions from people you respect

If you are new to breeding, now is the time to utilise your mentors, other breeders, and licensed judges to provide their opinions on your litter.

Not only do they have years of knowledge, but they are not emotionally attached to the litter so they can just observe the pups on the day and form an opinion based on what they see. They will also have an idea of how the breed grows and matures.

You will learn a lot from having a variety of people (both from within your breed and from other breeds) assess and grade your litter. Nearly every person will have a slightly different take on the breed's priorities – some will focus more on specific breed features. Others will look more at the overall picture – so listen and learn!

Remember that having several people over for a 'puppy grading party' might be a lot of fun, but can be counterproductive if there are one or two personalities who tend to take over or dominate the discussion. You want to hear everyone's thoughts on the pups, so maybe scheduling separate visits may end up being more productive.

If you have used an external stud dog, the stud dog's owner will most likely be interested in what their dog has produced, so make sure you invite them to view the litter.

When is the best time to assess a litter?

Although there are breeders who may argue for a different age, the majority will say that the best time to assess your pups is at eight weeks of age.

At this point in time, they will be the closest in proportions to their adult form and will have developed their temperament and 'carriage' (how they hold themselves both standing and on the move) to a point where you can get an insight into the future adult.

Most breeders will also do a preliminary assessment of their litter at six weeks of age. This assessment coincides with their veterinary health check and first vaccination, so there may be things that the vet detects that may influence your choices. Although you may make some early decisions, be prepared for things to change by the time the pups reach eight weeks.





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A good idea is to take photos of the pups as they grow and develop. Many breeders will start training their pups to stand (often called 'stacking') on a table from about five weeks of age. This allows them to take a set of 'stacked' photos at six weeks and again at eight weeks.

Photos can be a great way to compare puppies and are a valuable resource later on when your pups are adults as you can go back and look at how they matured.

Tip:

When taking 'stacked' puppy photos, try to make sure that the pictures are all taken from the same distance and angle. A good idea is to set up your table, and then have the photographer sit on a chair in front of the table to take the photos. That way, the photos should all be similar and will allow a better comparison of the pups.

What are you looking at?

When assessing a pup, you are aiming to compare what is physically in front of you, with the 'perfect' example of the breed outlined in the breed standard. How closely does this puppy match the description? Where does the puppy excel, and where could it improve? Does it have the required breed characteristics (hallmarks) that set the breed apart from other breeds?

As a new breeder, it may help to sit down with your breed standard and write yourself a checklist. That way, as each puppy is examined, you can record your comments (or the comments of others) and at the end compare the pups on each point as well as overall.

You will need to consider:

- » **Overall shape and balance required for the breed** – this gives the breed its correct outline/silhouette. You will be looking at the length of body, length of leg, and the overall proportions of all of the body parts. This is usually assessed by standing the puppy (often on a raised surface such as a grooming table) and viewing it from the side, front and rear.

Tip:

If you don't have anyone to help you, setting up a mirror means you can hold the pup, and still view it from a distance.

- » **Breed Specific Traits & Breed 'Hallmarks'** – every breed has attributes that set them apart from other breeds – does the puppy have these?

- » **Movement and Carriage** – does the pup move in the manner described in the standard? Does it hold itself correctly in regards to head and tail position?

This is something that you will need to assess with the pup moving freely on the ground. Avoid using a leash at this stage, as you want to see what the puppy does without any influence from a handler.

- » **Temperament and Instinct** - Does the puppy show the required temperament and instinct? This is particularly important in working breeds.

Temperament and instinct may be one of the highest priorities if you or one of your puppy buyers are looking for a pup to train for a specific sport or task. This could be anything from hunting or herding ability to drive and trainability for dog sports or assistance dog work – each task requires a particular set of behavioural attributes.

- » **Health Criteria** – You may have already submitted DNA samples for breed specific disease screening, but then there are other things to consider such as undescended testes, the presence of umbilical or inguinal hernias, incorrect bites and the signs of any other breed specific health issues.

Remember:

The perfect animal does not exist. Even the most successful animals within your breed will have a few areas where they could improve. Your goal is to weigh up the merits of each puppy, and decide which attributes you value the most, and which you are prepared to compromise on.



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Which is the 'best' puppy?

Although you will have been objectively assessing the merits of each pup, deciding which is the 'best' (or 'pick of the litter') is a little more subjective. The pup you choose will depend on your selection criteria and aspirations. At the end of the day, you should be aiming to keep the healthiest and best conformed puppy in the litter, regardless of sex, colour or markings.

Although there is sometimes a 'stand out' puppy that everyone agrees is the pick puppy, more often than not, you will have a number of pups that excel in certain areas, but who have areas that you might like to improve. Maybe the puppy with the best overall body shape could have a slightly darker eye, or the pup with the strongest hindquarter could have a slightly better coat texture or shoulder placement. It will be up to you to set your priorities and consider what you might need most in your breeding program.

You will then need to consider the homes you have waiting for your pups, and think about which of the remaining pups is 'best' for them. People wanting a family pet or a dog to train for a specific task or activity will have a different set of priorities. They may value temperament and instinct much higher than other attributes.

Your goal is to match each puppy with their new family so that they are a good fit and have the best chances of a long and happy life together.



Time to make decisions

Most puppies will be ready to head off to their new homes from 8 weeks of age. They will have been vaccinated, and health checked at six weeks, and by eight weeks, the vaccine will have provided some temporary immunity. You will have families anxiously waiting to collect their new pet, so you will have to make some decisions.

Litter registration considerations

Although some breeders choose to submit their litter registration paperwork as soon as the pups are microchipped, most will wait until they have allocated pups to their homes. This allows the breeder to assign names to specific pups – such as when a puppy buyer has requested a particular name, or the breeder has a preferred name for the pup that they are keeping for themselves.

As you assess each pup in the litter, you will need to consider not only which home will be the best match for the puppy, but also whether you would like to register the pup on the Main Register or the Limited Register.

Pups registered on the limited register are not eligible for conformation showing or breeding. Many breeders choose this type of registration for pups that they feel are not of sufficient merit to be bred in the future.

'Running pups on'

Depending on your location and household, you may be in a position to be able to keep more than one pup, at least in the short term. This means the puppies will have a chance to grow and develop further before you have to decide which will remain with you.

Some breeders choose to do this where they have two pups that are very even, and they cannot decide which to keep, or where they have both a dog and bitch puppy of merit.



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Running the pups on allows additional time for co ordination to develop and developmental milestones such as teething to occur. Some breeders will wait until the pups are old enough to undergo testing for breed health issues that cannot be assessed at eight weeks before making a final decision.

If this is the case, you still want to send any other pups to their new homes as close to eight weeks of age as possible. This is an important time for pups to bond with their owners, and the demands of providing adequate socialisation opportunities and training for each puppy individually is too much for one person to do.

By reducing the number of pups, you will also be able to spend more one on one time with the pup or pups that you are likely to keep, preparing them to integrate into your household.

Remember:

If you plan to run on more than one pup, you need to ensure that you do not exceed your permitted number of animals. All pups must be registered with their local council by 12 weeks of age and will count towards your total number of pets.



Tips for assessing your litter

1. Try to remain objective when assessing your pups – you will have your favourites, but if you plan on progressing your breeding program, you have to put that aside and select the puppy that has the best overall merit.
2. No matter how badly you would like a ‘red and white boy’ or a ‘chocolate bitch’, you should never limit your choices by selecting a pup using only colour or sex.
3. Although a well constructed pup should move well – don’t be fooled by a flashy pup that catches your eye on the move, but who does not have important breed characteristics, or who is not well constructed.
4. Ask your mentor(s) lots of questions. If you are unsure about the terminology they are using, get them to explain clearly what they mean as they examine and discuss each pup.
5. Be very hesitant to keep any pups that have any health or congenital disease issues. Although many of these can be easily repaired (such as small hernias) or may resolve in time (testes which are very late to descend), you are setting yourself up to perpetuate the problem in future litters.
6. Do plenty of reading before assessing your litter. You should know your breed standard backwards and be familiar with the terminology used in it. There are also some fabulous resources available (either online or in books and videos) that can help you with litter assessment techniques.