

Don't Shop: Opt to Adopt!

By Ed Boks

As the Holidays approach many consider purchasing a puppy from a pet store. The intent is to place a cute bundle of joy under the tree to be found on Christmas morning to the delight of a child. This is understandable; a puppy does bring a tremendous sense of warmth and love into a home any time of the year, but especially, it seems, during the Holiday Season.



But Buyer Beware!

If you want a dog in your life, please don't buy a puppy mill puppy. Unfortunately, avoiding them requires tremendous discipline and awareness. Pet store clerks and other sellers never willingly admit their dogs come from puppy mills, despite [laws that require retailers to clearly and accurately identify the source of the animals](#) they have for sale so that customers can be aware that their purchase supports a horrific and cruel industry.

An edition of "[Oprah](#)" earlier this year focused national attention on the "puppy mill." A puppy mill is a dog-breeding operation intended to provide a non-stop supply of often purebred puppies to a public that seems to have an insatiable appetite for them, an appetite that has created a situation ripe for abuse.

Puppy mills force dogs to produce litter after litter just for profit. These dogs and their puppies are often plagued with suffering, resulting from disease, malnutrition, and loneliness. Oprah Winfrey's intrepid investigative reporter found bitches who, when rescued from these unconscionable conditions, could barely walk after living a life of immobilized confinement. Most people don't know that when they buy a puppy from a pet shop, a newspaper ad or from the internet, they are often supporting a cruel and inhumane industry.

We owe these dogs the favor of educating ourselves and others about the reality of puppy mills. No matter what kind of dog we desire, we can't let ourselves be duped. We must resist buying a puppy from a pet store, newspaper ad or website, where dogs from puppy mills are typically sold. Still, the temptations are difficult ones.

It's easy to gaze into the sad eyes of the puppy in the pet store window and want to "rescue" the lonely pooch...

Or you read an ad in the newspaper, and the couple seems so trustworthy, with their decades of experience breeding dogs...

You find a website with photos of green hills and beautiful puppies that insist the "little darlings" and "bundles of joy" were born in paradise and will only be sold to "loving families"...

But watch out! A cruel, mass dog-breeding facility could hide behind each of these scenarios. Even if you missed Oprah's exposé, most likely you've heard about these puppy factories. Puppy mills frequently house dogs in shockingly poor conditions, particularly for the "breeding stock" animals who are caged and continually bred for years, without human companionship, and then killed, abandoned or sold to another "miller" after their fertility wanes.

These adult dogs are bred repeatedly to produce litter after litter, without the prospect of ever becoming part of a family themselves. In addition to an abused mother (and we've occasionally seen heartbreaking examples of abandoned overbred females come into the City shelters), the result is hundreds of thousands of puppies churned out each year for sale at pet stores, over the internet, and through newspaper ads. This practice will end only when people stop buying these puppy mill puppies.

How do you separate fact from fiction?

1. Pet stores cater to impulsive buyers and consumers seeking convenient transactions. Unlike responsible rescuers and breeders, these stores don't interview prospective buyers to ensure responsible, lifelong homes for the pets they sell, and the stores may be staffed by employees with limited knowledge about pets and pet care.

2. Puppy mill puppies often have medical problems. These problems can lead to veterinary bills in the thousands of dollars. But pet retailers count on the bond between families and their new puppies being so strong that the puppies won't be returned (though the law requires them to accept returns). And guarantees are often so difficult to comply with that they are virtually useless. In addition, poor breeding and socialization practices at many puppy mills can lead to behavioral problems throughout the puppies' lives. In the event a puppy purchased from a store does experience medical problems, the buyer should file a [Pet Seller Complaint Form](#).

3. A "USDA-inspected" breeder does not mean a "good" breeder. Be wary of claims by pet store staff that they sell animals only from breeders

who are "USDA-inspected." The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) enforces the federal law called the Animal Welfare Act (AWA), which regulates commercial breeding operations. But the act doesn't require all commercial breeders to be licensed, and the USDA establishes only minimum-care standards in enforcing this law and its inspection team is chronically understaffed. Breeders are required to provide food, water, and shelter, but not love, socialization, or freedom from confining cages. Sadly, many USDA-licensed and inspected puppy mills operate under squalid conditions with known violations of the AWA. But federal law constrains state and local authorities from blocking the shipping and sale of these animals across state lines, and current efforts to regulate their importation from overseas leave something to be desired, placing that much more of a burden on the customer to make the right choices.

4. Many disreputable breeders sell their dogs directly to the public over the Internet and through newspaper ads. They often sell several breeds of dogs, but may advertise each breed in a separate place and not in one large advertisement or website. These breeders are not required to be inspected by any federal agency and, in many states, are not inspected at all.

5. Reputable breeders care where their puppies go and interview prospective adopters. They don't sell through pet stores or to families they haven't thoroughly checked out.

6. Purebred "papers" do not guarantee the quality of the breeder or the dog. Even the American Kennel Club (AKC) readily admits that it "cannot guarantee the quality or health of dogs in its registry."

I can't say this enough: If you're looking for an animal to join your family, you should not buy from a pet store, and you should be very wary of websites and newspaper ads. Above all, don't ever buy a dog if you can't physically visit every area of the home or breeding facility where the seller keeps the dog.

Puppy mills will continue to operate until people stop buying their dogs. Putting them out of business should be a goal of every dog lover (and we should be so fortunate as to be faced with the dilemma of what to do with the remaining mothers and puppies if and when we succeed). We urge you to visit your [local shelter](#) or to do business with a respectable rescue individual or organization. You are likely to find a wide selection of healthy, well-socialized puppies and adult dogs—including purebreds—just waiting for that special home—yours.