



Get Started with a **LIVESTOCK GUARDIAN DOG**

After choosing a working companion, follow these tips for housing and socializing your LGD.

By Jan Dohner

“I just brought home a livestock guardian dog. Now what?” I read this question almost every day on various online livestock guardian dog forums. First, congratulations!

Second, here are some tips on how to welcome your working dog to your homestead.

Hopefully you’ve located a healthy pup from a good breeder who chooses breeding dogs carefully for their working behaviors, temperament, and sound-

ness. Most importantly, if you want a good working dog, you’ll need to buy a pup from a recognized LGD breed or a cross of recognized breeds—and nothing else. LGD breeds were developed through centuries to be perfectly suited to this work, and they inherit a set of genetic behaviors and traits. You can’t train another breed to be an LGD. (See “Guidelines for Selecting an LGD,” Page XX.)

LGD Lodging

People are happy to offer up LGD advice; unfortunately, much of it is contradictory. Myths and misconceptions abound. If you bought your pup from a breeder with good working dogs, their advice will be enormously helpful.

How you proceed after your purchase should be determined by the role you have in mind for your dog. LGD breeds can function in their traditional role as a full-time, outdoor livestock guardian; as a farm and family guardian who lives near the house and occasionally comes inside; or as a family companion who lives indoors. For our purposes, I'm going to assume your new pup will be living and working outside full-time with stock.

If your dog is to be a full-time LGD, it needs to be housed in a safe and secure area with a good outdoor shelter or barn. As long as your LGD is a minimum of 8 weeks old, is healthy, and has suitable housing, it will be fine outside in winter, unless temperatures are drastically and unusually frigid. LGD pups and dogs live outside across the northern United States and in Canada.

Your dog will fare better outdoors in winter after it's 12 weeks old, but if your dog is younger and you bring it inside the house, you'll be setting expectations of

where it will be living, and the eventual separation will be even harder.

A 16-by-16-square-foot area is a suitable size for a very young pup's pen. Some folks construct a larger, permanent kennel out of livestock panels or chain link that can be used when the adult dog needs to be confined. If you're worried about large predators, make sure the pen is secure at night with a solid cover of stock panels, chain link, or a roof. Tarps aren't sufficient

LGDs can act as full-time livestock protectors, farm and family guardians, or indoor companions.

protection from a larger predator.

Yes, your dog may cry at first—just like a new puppy in a crate in the house. But constantly responding to its cries or bringing it into the house will make the eventual separation worse or will condition your dog to escape to the house. Offer lots of attention in the pen, but don't reward constant cries. Consider placing the pen out of sight of your comings and goings. Don't allow your dog to live in your yard

or hang out on your porch unless that's where you want it to work later.

Bonding with Stock and Poultry

If your pup is destined to protect stock and poultry, it needs to be within sight and sound of them from the very beginning, if at all possible. Pups from working parents usually have excellent early socialization to stock.

Some folks have very reliable older animals that can serve as companions to a pup, but larger animals can also bully or injure a puppy. Never leave a pup completely alone with baby animals, new mothers, poultry, or stock that isn't used to LGDs. Many people keep their young dogs near stock or birds, but only with supervision. You can place puppy pens right next to or inside your stock enclosure.

Take your pup with you when you do chores so you can supervise. Some folks keep a young pup leashed to their belt, while others let the dog drag a long line so it can be caught if it exhibits inappropriate behavior. Good behavior should be praised, and bad behavior needs to be caught in the act. Some folks sit out with the pup and their birds or animals to foster calm acceptance by both stock and dog.

In the homelands of these breeds,



Guidelines for Selecting an LGD Pup or Adult

Don't adopt a pup under the age of 8 weeks—try to choose one closer to 12 weeks old. Research has proven that pups learn important lessons from their littermates on how to interact with other dogs, though after adoption you should only raise one LGD pup at a time.

Don't select a pup that's small or fine-boned, or that has a pointed muzzle. Most LGDs average 20 pounds at 8 weeks of age. At 16 weeks, they should weigh 35 to 40 pounds. A pup that's significantly smaller probably has mixed parentage and won't grow large enough to handle predators. If you're obtaining an adult LGD, it should weigh 80 to 120 pounds or more, depending on the breed. However, also avoid oversized and massive dogs, which may result from crosses with other breeds.

Don't select an albino dog or a dog lacking dark coloring around the eyes or on the nose. Pink skin on the nose or around the eyes poses a serious risk of sunburn and skin cancers, especially for a full-time working LGD. No LGD breeds have pink coloring in those areas.



Perform chores with your LGD at first so you can supervise, provide guidance, and restrict inappropriate behavior.

pups were never left alone with sheep or goats—they were always supervised by shepherds or by older, reliable dogs. Many experienced owners don't believe LGDs are reliable until age 2 or so—especially in the absence of a good adult mentor dog or active supervision. Be especially careful with young dogs during breeding or birthing times. Such circumstances are especially unsettling to many dogs, so you'll need to closely supervise adolescents through their first season with birthing animals.

Poultry are the most challenging and nontraditional animals for LGDs to work with. A very young pup is often good with birds in the beginning, but without careful supervision, older pups may engage in chasing or playing that results in tragic consequences.

Be aware that this particular role will take a lot of time before the dog is reliable. Many great adult LGDs have accidentally played with or licked a bird to death before they became reliable.

Training and Socializing

Even if your new pup is to be a full-time LGD, it will need plenty of basic handling and training as well—just do it where your LGD lives and works. If you have children, take them with you when you do chores and work with the dog so that it comes to know your kids as well. You may hear that you shouldn't give your LGD pup attention, but that's a myth. LGDs have always worked with shepherds. You'll want your dog to bond to you as well as

Characteristics to Avoid

Blue eyes or red or blue merle coloring. No LGD breeds have these characteristics. Speckling and freckling of color in white areas is also suspect. These traits indicate another breed in the dog's parentage—mostly likely a herding breed.

Ears that are semi-erect, pricked, or set high on the skull like they want to stand up. All LGD breeds have low-set, drop ears unless they've been cropped.

Straight, thick tails. LGD tails are typically long and often curved, saber-like, or curled, or have a crook at the end. Some breeds may have cropped tails.

Very short, single, or smooth coats. All LGD breeds (except for the extremely rare Laboreiro) are double-coated.

Characteristics to Look For

A moderate activity level. Unless your dog will need to guard very large pastures, dogs with lower activity levels are usually more suited and easier to train as LGDs than highly active dogs.

A low prey drive. LGDs aren't retrievers. Avoid puppies that chase

and fight over a thrown toy, or a pup that continually chases objects.

A relaxed temperament. Look for a pup that's interested in you but not overly aggressive, fearful, shy, or clingy. Full-time guardians should be problem-solvers that aren't dependent on human companionship.

A high pain threshold. Working dogs need to tolerate pokes and prods by livestock, so pups with average-to-high pain thresholds will be your best choice.

A cautious reaction to livestock. If you're able to watch the pups interact with quiet stock, look for a pup that may be curious but is somewhat cautious. Avoiding eye contact is an excellent indicator of good instinct. Avoid pups that bark, jump, or bite stock even if they're accidentally stepped on. Older pups should definitely be submissive and calm around stock.

This is where a good breeder will be invaluable to you. Breeders have been observing their pups for several weeks and know a great deal about each pup's personality and behaviors. If you're buying a pup from a distant breeder, you will be relying completely on this knowledge.

the other animals.

Even a working LGD should behave well on a leash and have experience being tethered and kenneled so it will cooperate in an emergency. And if your LGD will need to visit the vet's office, practice some car trips. Lots of walks in pastures or fields will help burn off some of that puppy energy before it becomes destructive. Meaty bones are also good to occupy time.

If your dog will live in or around the house, you may want to attend classes and socialize him to people and places, although LGD breeds aren't a good fit for dog parks. Most folks don't take full-time working dogs off the farm except to a vet.

Other Family Dogs

Don't rush these introductions. Give everyone lots of time to settle and get used to each other through fences. Typically, an older LGD will be kind to a young pup but may need significant time to adjust to another adolescent or adult dog.

If your dog's job will be to protect your stock, many experienced folks recommend that you don't allow it to play with your family dogs or other herding or hunting dogs. Yes, your LGD will need to know who the other dogs are and that they belong to you, but you don't want your pup picking up chasing behavior or other bad



Introduce your pup to the poultry or livestock it's meant to protect for supervised socialization.

habits from these dogs. Your LGD should protect your animals from dogs that threaten their stock, so don't allow your pup to play with neighboring dogs or strange dogs. Don't tolerate such dogs on your property, and make a show of chasing them away.

Fencing

LGDs need to be kept securely fenced unless you live on a very large property without neighbors, or your animals graze on open range. Barbed wire or weak fencing is escapable, and boundary training isn't usually successful with LGD breeds,

which were developed over centuries to work on very large, open spaces. These dogs seek to patrol, and they can easily extend their zone of protection against predators over 2 miles or more.

Pups should learn to respect fences right from the beginning so they don't establish a habit of wandering and roaming as they mature. Breaking a bad habit is much harder than preventing it from forming in the first place. Some folks find electric scare wires or an invisible or radio fence system to be a good backup to physical fences when dogs are determined to escape.

Don't use invisible fencing alone, as many dogs will "take a hit" in pursuit of a threat or a female in heat. Invisible or poor fencing could also allow predators inside your pastures, making your dog's job that much harder. 🌳

RESOURCES

ONLINE

Learning About LGDs Facebook Group:

www.Facebook.com/Groups/LearningAboutLGDs

Predator Friendly Ranching, a blog by

Louise Liebenberg:

<https://goo.gl/kLIH6Z>

Livestock Guardian Dog Education

Network:

[www.LivestockGuardianDog.](http://www.LivestockGuardianDog.Weebly.com)

[Weebly.com](http://www.LivestockGuardianDog.Weebly.com)

"Is This Breed a Livestock Guard

Dog?" by Jan Dohner:

[www.MotherEarthNews.com/LGD-](http://www.MotherEarthNews.com/LGD-Breeds)

[Breeds](http://www.MotherEarthNews.com/LGD-Breeds)

BOOKS

Livestock Guardians by Jan Dohner

Livestock Protection Dogs by Orysia

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With more than 35 years of hands-on LGD experience, Jan Dohner (www.JanDohner.com) writes about the use of livestock guardians for MOTHER EARTH NEWS and Storey Publishing. She is the author of *Livestock Guardians*, *Farm Dogs*, and the new *Encyclopedia of Animal Predators* (all available on Page XX).