

Chapter 1

Shih Tzu and You

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In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding the Shih Tzu
 - ▶ Discovering what the breed needs
 - ▶ Knowing whether you and the Shih Tzu mesh
 - ▶ Determining what you want in a dog
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He stares at you longingly, his big dark eyes glistening with love. She gazes at you, the god of her universe, and then shakes her long golden hair. Irresistible, coy, and flirtatious, yet passionately devoted to you . . . is this the love of your life?

Maybe a fluffy, cuddly, sweet-faced Shih Tzu would make the perfect dog for you. Maybe, just maybe, Samson really is the pet you've always dreamed of. Maybe spunky little Lola really is your canine match made in heaven. Or, maybe the little lion dog really isn't suited to be your next great love, because you aren't crazy about grooming or need a high-energy dog to go running with.

Whether you're still deciding on the right breed or you just want to know more about the little fella on your lap, this chapter serves as your broad survey of this most adorable of the toy breeds. Consider this chapter your crash course in Shih Tzu — Shih Tzu 101.

The Lowdown on the Shih Tzu

You don't have to bend over much to pet a Labrador Retriever on the head, but with a Shih Tzu (pronounced sheed-zoo, see Figure 1-1), you need to get down on the floor to pet him. His short legs don't get him much higher than about ten inches, so to admire all his wonderful features, you have to take yourself to his level.



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Figure 1-1: A Shih Tzu is a small dog with a big heart.

The show-dog Shih Tzu has specific features (refer to Chapter 2), but show dog or not, all Shih Tzu have basic physical and personality traits in common, and the most noticeable trait is weight. Shih Tzu are heavier than they look and not as delicate as some finer-boned toy breeds. But despite the heft, Shih Tzu are perfectly sized for a lap or a handbag — not for hunting or tracking, pulling a sled, treeing a raccoon, or guarding a farm. Shih Tzu don't herd sheep or win races, and they certainly don't swim. Shih Tzu just don't have the body or the attitude for work, and although they can scare off a mouse in the house, chances are, they won't bother.



The Shih Tzu is built for one job and one job alone: to accompany you on your journey through life as your close personal friend. But having a Shih Tzu isn't all about you. Your Shih Tzu needs some very important things from her human caretaker in order to thrive and be a happy, healthy dog. Considering all she does for you, you must be willing, as a responsible and dedicated pet owner, to give back to your Shih Tzu the things she needs.

What Does a Shih Tzu Need?

This little dog's needs aren't complicated and can be summarized with one word: You! Okay, that's not very specific, so this section details your responsibilities to your little one.

Companionship, and a lot of it

A dog bred for companionship must be allowed to do his job, and his job is to be with you. You have to be available and present for him to feel like he has a purpose. When you aren't home, your Shih Tzu waits for you. If you leave him alone most of the day, he spends most of his time waiting for you. Shih Tzu don't like to be alone all the time, and being alone is no life for a companion dog.



Plus, Shih Tzu are social animals. They love to play and be with people, other dogs, and even cats. If you work all day, your Shih Tzu will be much happier with another pet friend, a visit on your lunch hour, or even spending the day at a nice doggy daycare facility. Spending time around other people and other dogs teaches the Shih Tzu about the world, and this kind of experience makes your Shih Tzu a more well-adjusted and friendly pet.

If you work at home, you can probably manage a schedule of work and play and potty breaks for your dog, but if you work away from your home, you need to make arrangements for someone to give your Shih Tzu a potty break. At the end of the day, be prepared for her to want to play and snuggle and just be with you.

Shelter . . . and a little luxury



A Shih Tzu needs warm, safe shelter. Just remember the following if you want a Shih Tzu:

- ✓ **Shih Tzu can't live outside.** Their short noses and heavy coats make hot humid weather dangerous, and a Shih Tzu stuck outside in the sun all day (or even in the shade when the humidity soars) is in serious danger of heatstroke (see Chapter 12 for more info on how to keep your pup safe and healthy).
- ✓ **Shih Tzu aren't suited for cold weather.** Shih Tzu may be descended from Tibetan temple dogs that lived in frigid, snowy climates, but those dogs were larger and heartier than today's dog, so forget about giving a Shih Tzu a doghouse and leaving him at the mercy of the elements. Sure, your Shih Tzu may enjoy a short romp in the snow, but be sure to dry him when he comes in (and maybe snuggle by the fire for awhile, too).



So you know your Shih Tzu needs a warm safe place indoors, but you can't just let your Shih Tzu lie on the cold, hard floor, can you? I suppose you *could*, but here's a head's up: This dog is a *royal* dog. She expects a little luxury in her life. Is that really so much to ask? For example, your Shih Tzu loves to lounge on soft furniture, and she'll probably prefer to sleep with you, if you let her. Whether you

let your little dog into the bed or not, you also need other comfortable spots for your Shih Tzu to lounge when it's not bed time. Try out a soft dog bed, a safe crate or kennel, and access to other furniture (check out Chapter 5 for adding some luxury).

Healthy food

Everybody functions better on healthy food than on junk food, of course, but a nutrient-dense diet is vitally important for a small dog because every bite counts. Your Shih Tzu, especially as a puppy, can't hold much in that little stomach, so food must be full of good nutrition. Shih Tzu puppies also need to eat at least three small meals to keep that small-dog metabolism fueled. A young puppy that doesn't get sufficient nutrition could die.

Additionally Shih Tzu have potentially sensitive skin, and a healthy diet keeps both his skin and coat in good condition. Some pet food companies make food designed specifically for small-breed puppies. Or, you may decide to make a homemade diet for your Shih Tzu. (For more about feeding your Shih Tzu properly, see Chapter 9.)

Exercise

Move it or lose it! Despite Lola's small size, she needs exercise to keep her muscles strong and her heart healthy. Too many Shih Tzu become overweight from an excess of treats and too little exercise, and it doesn't take many extra calories each day to make an eight-pound dog tip the scales in the direction of too-hefty. Extra weight puts added stress on the Shih Tzu's joints and internal organs, compromising her natural good health. (Check out Chapter 8 for specific ideas on playing and exercising with your dog.)



Never exercise your Shih Tzu in hot weather! Her short nose and heavy coat aren't built for the heat, and she can suffer serious health consequences. See Chapter 13 for more info on heatstroke.

Training

He may be cute and charming. He may have great personal charisma. But that doesn't mean Samson knows that your new carpet isn't his personal toilet, or that children's fingers aren't for nipping, or that dashing out the front door isn't safe. All dogs need training, even the cutest and most naturally polite. Don't forget that your Shih Tzu is a dog and doesn't run the household. He needs to know the rules, and you need to enforce the rules. For more on Shih Tzu socialization, behavior, and training, see Chapters 11, 15, and 17.

Toy breeds

Ever since dog shows became popular in the 19th century, purebred dogs have been registered with organizations like the American Kennel Club (AKC), the United Kennel Club (UKC), the Canadian Kennel Club (CKC), and the Kennel Club of the UK. These registries divide purebred dogs into groups according to their purpose. The AKC — the largest registry in the United States — recognizes Shih Tzu as a Toy breed, along with these other little guys:

- ✔ Affenpinscher
- ✔ Brussels Griffon
- ✔ Cavalier King Charles Spaniel
- ✔ Chihuahua
- ✔ Chinese Crested
- ✔ English Toy Spaniel
- ✔ Havanese
- ✔ Italian Greyhound
- ✔ Japanese Chin
- ✔ Maltese
- ✔ Manchester Terrier
- ✔ Miniature Pinscher
- ✔ Papillon
- ✔ Pekingese
- ✔ Pomeranian
- ✔ Poodle (Toy)
- ✔ Pug
- ✔ Silky Terrier
- ✔ Toy Fox Terrier
- ✔ Yorkshire Terrier

The Toy Group includes 21 breeds (as of 2006), including the Shih Tzu. Although some other groups include smaller dogs, the Toy breeds have certain qualities in common:

- ✔ A portable size appropriate for many different living environments
- ✔ A big personality in a tiny package
- ✔ A propensity for companionship

Toy breeds have been bred to be companions to humans, some for thousands of years. A Shih Tzu may look a lot different from a Chihuahua, a Pug, or a Chinese Crested, but when it comes to skill as a companion, these little guys are all members of the same club.

Group names and classification systems differ among registries. The UKC has a Companion Group, which includes the Shih Tzu. The CKC and the Kennel Club of the UK also include a Toy Group, but neither organization groups the Shih Tzu as a Toy breed. The CKC considers him a member of the Non-Sporting Group, along with dogs like the Lhasa Apso, Bichon Frise, and Tibetan Spaniel. The Kennel Club of the UK states that he's a member of the Utility Group, along with the Lhasa Apso, Tibetan Spaniel, and Toy Poodle.

Medical care

A veterinarian who understands small dogs is one of your most important allies in caring for your Shih Tzu. These pups need regular check-ups and vaccinations (necessary parts of your commitment to your Shih Tzu), but a vet can also help you with pest control, skin allergies, behavioral issues, and any questions you may have about caring for your little dog. For more on Shih Tzu healthcare, refer to Chapters 12 and 13.

Grooming, grooming, and grooming!

I've saved the best for last . . . the best, or the most time-consuming, depending on your perspective. Most Shih Tzu have long, thick coats, which means they need grooming . . . a lot of it. Most pet owners have their Shih Tzu professionally groomed every four to six weeks. This timeline is a fine, but be prepared to pay for the service.



Even with professional grooming, you still need to brush and comb your Shih Tzu every day, or at least a few times a week, to keep mats and tangles from forming as the coat grows.

If you keep your Shih Tzu in a short haircut, you can minimize the work, but a Shih Tzu in full coat really should be thoroughly tended every day. Add to your brushing other routines, such as regular nail clipping, teeth cleaning, eye care, ear care, and all-over massage and you have quite the high-maintenance little pooch. You can't wait for a professional groomer to do these tasks (unless you want to take your Shih Tzu in weekly, which can get pretty expensive). For more info on grooming your Shih Tzu, see Chapter 10.

Are You a Match?

To spin off one of the world's greatest writers: To get a Shih Tzu or not to get a Shih Tzu? That is the question. Don't take this decision lightly. You're embarking on a lifetime (at least your dog's lifetime) commitment, and you want to make sure you, your lifestyle, your family, and your home all are good matches for a Shih Tzu. This section takes a closer look to see if a Shih Tzu is the match for you.

Why a Shih Tzu may be perfect

They're short. They're sassy. But are they right for you? A Shih Tzu might be your perfect dog if you

- ✔ **Love to brush dogs:** Shih Tzu need a lot of grooming!
- ✔ **Think flat-faced dogs are just *too* cute:** The Shih Tzu doesn't have a long slender profile. He has an adorable short nose.
- ✔ **Enjoy being worshipped:** Your Shih Tzu thinks you're *all that*.
- ✔ **Think pampering and cuddling a small dog is fun:** Your Shih Tzu needs a lot of one-on-one cuddle time to be happy.
- ✔ **Like to take your dog with you whenever you can:** Your Shih Tzu is always ready to hit the road with you.
- ✔ **Work at home or come home frequently during the day:** Bred to be a companion dog, the Shih Tzu needs to spend most of her time being a companion, not sitting alone.
- ✔ **Think lying around on the couch makes the perfect weekend:** Shih Tzu aren't athletic dogs. They prefer to hang out and relax.
- ✔ **Can't stand hot weather:** Your Shih Tzu can't stand it either. In fact, Shih Tzu are prone to heatstroke.

Or why a Shih Tzu may not be your ideal dog

Shih Tzu are cute, but that criterion isn't all that you should go on. A Shih Tzu probably isn't the best breed for you if you

- ✔ **Get impatient brushing your *own* hair:** If you don't like to waste time grooming yourself, you certainly won't have time to groom a Shih Tzu.
- ✔ **Don't like the sound of snoring and snuffling:** The Shih Tzu's short nose creates a certain amount of nasal noise.
- ✔ **Prefer an independent dog that isn't too clingy.** Shih Tzu want to spend time with you.
- ✔ **Think that because you have to work, your dog should make himself useful, too:** This dog's job is to be with you. She's not interested in retrieving or pulling a sled or guarding the house.
- ✔ **Aren't home very often:** Shih Tzu need people, not alone time.

- ✔ **Have several small children:** Do you really have time to take care of a Shih Tzu if you have small children? Probably not. Plus, small children can accidentally injure a small dog.
- ✔ **Like to go running, biking, swimming, or spend your weekends training for a marathon and think it would be fun for the dog to come along, too:** Unless you want to stick the Shih Tzu in a doggy backpack, you can forget your dreams of a marathon-training buddy.
- ✔ **Love the heat and can see yourself relocating to a tropical island:** Your Shih Tzu would prefer a cabin in the mountains. He doesn't *do* tropical.

Quick Questions to Ask Yourself

If you read the preceding section, you may think you've decided that a Shih Tzu is perfect for you, but wait! You still have a few more topics to consider. Ask yourself the questions in the following sections, and spend some serious time considering your answers.

Why do you want a Shih Tzu?

What about a Shih Tzu really appeals to you? If you want to replace a former Shih Tzu, you already have a good idea about what a Shih Tzu is like, so getting a new Shih Tzu puppy may not seem so scary. On the other hand, all Shih Tzu have their own, unique personalities, and your new puppy won't be exactly like your beloved former pet. Are you ready to accept your new dog?

If you haven't had a Shih Tzu before but you just love the way they look, that's a good start. Much of her appeal is in her charming and unique appearance. But you still have to be prepared for the grooming requirements and the attention your Shih Tzu needs.

If you know a Shih Tzu but never owned one yourself, then you already know how the adults look and act. Just remember that an adult Shih Tzu is more likely to be calmer and less likely to cause mischief than a feisty little puppy. Your Shih Tzu puppy will take at least a couple of years to grow up, and you need to be patient.

Are you a homebody, a couch potato, or an amateur athlete?

People often love the look of the Shih Tzu but just don't realize how physically limited this breed is. Shih Tzu simply can't exercise

too long, run very far, or even stay outside for extended periods in hot weather.



If you like to be at home, however, your Shih Tzu will be your happy and enthusiastic friend, companion, and armchair buddy. And if you want to *watch* sports, your Shih Tzu will be more than happy to help you cheer for your favorite team.

One exception is the competition Shih Tzu — some people train their dogs to compete in obedience (a highly competitive sport that measures how well a dog can follow commands) or agility (a super-active obstacle course sport), but these dogs are like professional athletes (check Chapter 17 for more info). If you want an exercise buddy, consider a sporting or herding breed instead.

Is your home Shih Tzu-friendly?

You may like the idea of a Shih Tzu, but if you aren't the only one in your home, you have to consider the environment as a whole. Is your home Shih-Tzu friendly? The following sections help answer this overall question.

Do you have young children?

Your two year old wouldn't intentionally hurt a flea, but a young child can't understand that a Shih Tzu isn't a stuffed animal. If you have very young children, think twice about getting a Shih Tzu.



Young children can be too rough on a puppy, and a Shih Tzu may even feel forced to nip or bite to defend herself from a child's harassment. If a puppy is dropped or fallen on, the puppy can be seriously injured. Even an older Shih Tzu can be injured by a child or may be less patient with a child's poking and prodding, although older Shih Tzu who're used to children are a much better bet as a companion to children.

Older kids, on the other hand, tend to be great and helpful companions to Shih Tzu — if they're taught how to handle the dog safely and gently. They can walk, groom, and play with the dog. (Check out Chapter 7 for more info on children and Shih Tzu.)

Do you have other pets?



Although the friendly Shih Tzu loves to hang with other dogs or cats, some other breeds aren't so dog-friendly. Some dog-aggressive terriers and guardian breeds can attack a Shih Tzu or mistake her for a prey animal. Or, a large dog may injure the Shih Tzu during innocent roughhousing.

However, some large dogs do well with small dogs and often defer to their leadership. You must know your big dog very well before taking that risk, and supervision is extremely important. Shih Tzu normally get along with other small dogs, especially other Shih Tzu, as long as the other dog is friendly, too. Even so, the bottom line is your Shih Tzu would rather spend time with you than anyone else.



Some Shih Tzu may chase small animals like ferrets, hamsters, rabbits, or birds. Others ignore these animals completely or try to make friends. Be sure your home situation is safe for your new Shih Tzu, as well as for your other pets before bringing a Shih Tzu home. (Refer to Chapter 7 for more info on Shih Tzu and other animals.)

Do you like to do hair?

This book contains many references to the Shih Tzu's significant grooming needs, and that's no accident. You really do need to spend time grooming your dog every day. Even if you cut the dog's coat short, it continues to grow. You really have to like doing hair (or be able to afford a professional groomer) to appreciate a Shih Tzu as a pet. Check out Chapter 10 for more on grooming.

Can you afford a Shih Tzu?

A Shih Tzu is such a little dog, but he does incur some big expenses. The average dog owner spends about \$6,000 on a dog over the dog's lifetime (which can be anywhere from 12 to 18 years), including the cost of the dog, food, supplies, and standard veterinary care. If you factor in the Shih Tzu's longer-than-average life span, the cost of monthly grooming, and any additional vet care your Shih Tzu may need if he ever gets sick, you can go well over that figure.

Even an adopted older Shih Tzu can cost a lot in vet care and supplies. Consider the price of your time, too, because your Shih Tzu takes up a lot of it. Can you afford all that? If it simply isn't in the budget, perhaps you should wait awhile until you're in a better position to afford a dog.



Despite the expense, the emotional, psychological, and physical benefits of having a loving companion dog offset the financial costs of pet ownership. Experts say petting a dog actually lowers your blood pressure, and pet owners are generally healthier and live longer than people without pets. Considering how much you get back, you may realize that your Shih Tzu is worth every penny.