

Basenji as a Family Dog – Our Experience



So you're thinking about adding a Basenji to your family? And you also have kids or are planning to someday soon? Well then settle in and read our story.

When my wife Lana and I moved in together we knew we weren't ready to have children yet, but we did want something close, which of course meant a puppy. Lana had never had a dog growing up. I had one, a Basenji/Australian Shepherd mix who we had adopted from the SPCA (while he did have a tendency to want to herd, he mostly took after his Basenji side in both appearance and attitude). I remembered him fondly so suggested that we look into adding a Basenji to our lives. The joke went that we had three main criteria for a dog: little or no barking, no drooling, and shouldn't smell bad. As it turns out, there is no breed of dog that better matches those criteria than a Basenji. What we really didn't consider at the time was that in Basenji, all those attributes also came with some other ones, such as not listening to even the politest of requests, a criminal level of independence, and a host of other challenging traits.



Buddy in his prime



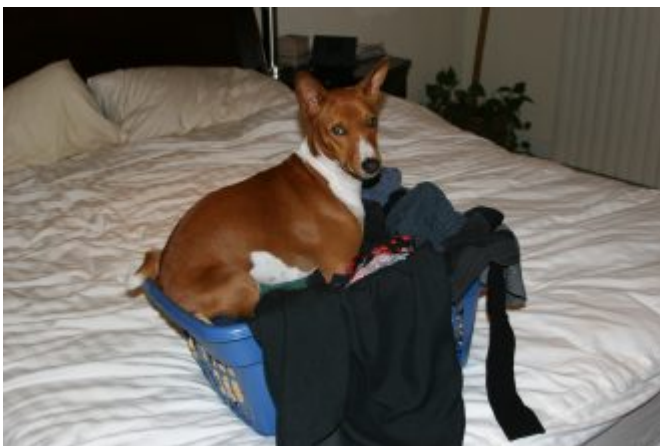
Meeting Buddy for the first time

After calling around to every Basenji breeder that we could find in California, we were eventually informed about a Basenji litter right in our home town. We quickly drove over to meet the puppies and see if we connected with one. That's when we met Buddy. Out of his 5 littermates, he was the only one that came over to us on his own, and seemed to enjoy being held by us. Maybe it's just revisionist history, but the three of us (my wife, myself, and Buddy) seemed to bond right away. He was only 7 weeks old when we first met, so it wasn't until a week later that we picked him up and brought him home with us.



Even at a young age, Basenjis have a knack for finding the warm spots

It took him a couple of days to get his bearings, but then the real Basenji in him came out. We quickly learned that anything we wanted to remain intact, we had to put away or at least out of his reach. Remote controls, shoes, food or food packaging, pretty much everything was fair game for Buddy to chew on – and these were lifelong tendencies, not just the puppy phase.



Buddy loved to “help”, this is him helping with the laundry

We always knew we wanted children, so one of our main concerns, even before we brought Buddy home, was how he would interact with our future children. We have no idea if this was the right thing to do, but wanted to “baby proof” Buddy as much as possible. We attempted to make sure he would be ok with a few things we suspected young children might subject him to. We made sure he was ok with being touched while he was eating, as well as having his food taken away (we would of course give it right back to him). We would also occasionally wake him up when he was sound asleep (thinking this would be something a child might do, and knowing this is an issue for some Basenjis). Maybe these things helped, or maybe we were just

lucky (we now suspect it was the latter) but it turned out that Buddy was absolutely amazing with both our boys.



Buddy meeting Josh for the first time

For 4 years, Buddy was our furry and energetic baby who got all our attention. After that, we had another baby, this one a bit less furry, and much louder. That's when Josh was born.

Even though Buddy had been a wonderful, albeit mischievous dog, we were still concerned about how he'd behave having a newborn in the house 24/7. He had been great with babies and young children that our friends had brought over, so we were optimistic.

We had heard that bringing home a blanket smelling like the baby, before the baby was actually brought home, was a smart thing to do, so we did that. Then a day later we brought the actual baby home. Once again, we have no idea if the blanket trick helped, but when we did bring Josh home from the hospital, things went well. We brought Josh home in his car seat and placed him on the ground so that Buddy could meet his new brother at his own level and on his own terms. After some very cautious sniffing, Buddy seemed to understand that this new little guy was important to us, which meant that he was also important to him.



Repeating the same baby introduction ceremony, this time with Liam

I'm not going to say it was easy having a Basenji and a newborn in the house, but at least the good news was that we had already baby proofed the house 4 years earlier for Buddy's sake. With that said, there were definitely new things for Buddy to get into and disrupt. God forbid we should leave an unattended dirty diaper lying around. Fortunately we had only done that a few times, and even more fortunate, those were only diapers that had been #1ed. When Buddy would be lucky enough to find one of those dirty diapers he would shake them until they would violently explode, flinging urine soaked desiccant all over the room. There's nothing like cleaning that up while you're also exhausted from newborn related lack of sleep.

But it wasn't all challenges, Buddy didn't seem to be envious of the attention we gave Josh. If we were holding Josh on the couch or playing with him on the floor, Buddy would calmly sit next to us and just be present.



Nap time for everyone!

Two years later we repeated the same ceremony with the blanket and presentation of a new baby in a car seat on the floor. This time the baby was our youngest son, Liam. In the end we had the same result, with Buddy understanding that Liam too was his human brother.



Buddy getting in on some binky action

As the kids grew older, they started playing with more and more toys. At this point we had two types of toys in the house, toys that had been chewed on and toys that had not been chewed on yet. Eventually 100% of all toys had felt the wrath of Buddy's teeth. This was not something anyone was ever upset about, it was just accepted as inevitable, just like knowing the sun would rise again the next morning.



Buddy getting some love from Liam

Perhaps there were a few exceptions to the “toys getting chewed up” rule. We did teach the boys from a very young age that if there was a special toy that they didn’t want to get chewed on, that they would need to put that toy away as soon as they were done playing with it. The boys knew this from a very early age, so there was rarely a problem that their favorite toy got chewed on or destroyed, but of course this was one more thing on our plate to look out for.



Josh was always happy to share his crib

As the boys were growing up it was important to Lana and I that they always treated Buddy with respect. It was never acceptable that they hit, pull on, or in any other way mistreat Buddy. We never expected this to be a problem, and it never was, but we made sure to course correct any of their questionable behavior immediately. I do think that this helped ensure that the boys and Buddy always had a loving relationship with each other. I’m sure it also turned the boys into better humans.

Josh and Liam also both learned that walking around the house with food would not end well for them (it would end wonderfully for Buddy though). Our rule (which Buddy was more than happy enough to enforce) was that if they were eating, they should do it at the table. Of course we couldn’t always get in front of this, especially when guests came over.

Inevitably, at our various parties, we would end up with a crying child who would be minus one ice cream cone and one happy Basenji who was plus one ice cream cone. It was during these years that Buddy really grew into his middle name, which is probably shared by many Basenjis. What's his middle name you ask? Why it's "No" of course.



No shortage of cuddle time between the boys and Buddy

Before the kids were born we'd take Buddy to the dog park several times a week. After they were born we didn't have as much time for that so it was mostly walks around the neighborhood and playing with him in our enclosed yard. As the saying goes, "a tired Basenji is a good Basenji", so we always did try to make sure Buddy got regular exercise.

After the kids got older and we got some of our time back, we tried to take Buddy to the dog park again, but he had become hit and miss in terms of getting along with the other dogs, so it was mainly back to neighborhood walks and inviting over select dogs who we knew Buddy would get along with. We're also not sure if that transition to being a much pickier dog (in terms of who he got along with) is a Basenji thing or a Buddy thing, but it's definitely something we remember going through with him.



Buddy at the dog park, trying to make friends in his own way

One other piece of advice we have for Basenji parents is to set them up for success, or rather don't set them up for failure. Don't leave that piece of cake on the coffee table thinking this will be the one magical time that your Basenji won't scarf it down at the first opportunity. Don't forget to put away those brand new fuzzy slippers thinking your dog won't shred THESE ones, unlike the 10 pairs that came before. **The best attitude to have with a Basenji is that whatever bad thing they just did was your fault, because whatever it is that they did, you should have known they were going to do it (if you're only going to take one thing away from this article – this is it!).**

Buddy lived with us for over 15 years and was deeply loved the entire time. He wasn't the easiest dog to live with, but we wouldn't have traded him for even the best behaved dog in the world.



One of our last pictures with Buddy, he was deeply loved until the very end

After Buddy crossed the rainbow bridge we had a discussion about whether or not we'd get another dog. It was not a long discussion. Lana and the boys instantly said that yes, they wanted another furry addition to the family, and since their only experience had been with a Basenji, that's what they wanted again.



The day we met Boomer, still too young to take him home with us though

Our one and only call when we were ready to set things into motion, was to Pat Fragassi. She helped us find Buddy all those years ago. Fortunately for us, she was planning on a Basenji litter with her kennel partner Jeff. It was about a year after we lost Buddy, that we brought Boomer home with us. Because we had experience with a male Basenji, we all thought it would be a good idea to get another male, and out of his 4 pup litter he was the only boy, so that made the decision very easy.

We tried the same tricks with Boomer as we had with Buddy in terms of food and waking him up from naps. That's when it became very clear that Basenjis (just like other dogs) have their own unique personalities. While Boomer is totally fine with us touching him while he's eating, or even taking away his food, he does not like to be bothered while he's sleeping, or even just lounging around. It turned out that while Boomer is still a very loving and affectionate dog, he's much more vocal about what he doesn't want



to put up with than Buddy. He loves to cuddle, but he wants to do it on his own terms. He also doesn't mind being held, but sometimes gives a quiet growl when being picked up. There are also a select few things that Boomer will "resource guard", such as bully sticks. That's something that Buddy never did, but with Boomer we've learned to respect the signs when we see them. This is also something we've been working with him on, with indications of improvement.

One other difference between Buddy and Boomer is that while Boomer is an overall grumpier dog than Buddy was, he gets along great with all other dogs. He's still young though, so this is something we're not taking for granted, or as an absolute.

The day Boomer came home with us



It's now been just over 3 years with Boomer, and while he's a different dog than Buddy, we love him just as much. Are Basenjis easy to live with? No they are not. We tell ourselves that their personalities and other positive traits make up for that, we tell ourselves this very often. One other thing we are constantly saying to each other is "first day with Boomer?" This is something we ask when one of us acts surprised that Boomer chewed on something, or in some other way shocked us with his highly questionable behavior (like eating a pen off my desk for the 178th time).

Now that the kids are older, there aren't as many toys lying around, so there's less for Boomer to chew on, but somehow he still finds his opportunities: pens (he just can't get enough of those pens!), socks, dirty laundry etc. With our boys getting older, things have become easier in terms of living with a Basenji, but there are times that all of us just want to sit on the couch in the evening and relax...but Boomer has other plans and starts to chew on something so that one of us has to get up and see what mischievous behavior he is getting into. We're pretty sure that 90% of the time he's doing this just to get attention, not to actually destroy something (that's just a bonus for him).



Like Buddy, Boomer also likes to "help" with laundry

Boomer does have a special bond with both of our boys, he knows their names, runs to them as soon as we say one of their names, wags his little tail and greets them with excitement when they come home. The boys are also the ones who took it upon themselves to teach Boomer how to sit, stay, and his other various tricks. When the boys go to bed, he goes with them and tucks himself in under one of their blankets each night, which usually leads to the argument about who gets him first. We don't take this bond between Boomer and the boys for granted and it warms our hearts to see it.



Boomer traveling across the country with us

In the end, we have no hesitation in saying that our Basenjis have been great family dogs. Would *all* Basenjis make a good family dog? Probably not, after all, each dog has its own personality, its own set of positive and negative traits. We'd also say that not all humans are cut out for having a Basenji either. For those who take themselves too seriously or need total control in their homes, Basenjis may not be a good fit. But what we can say is that if you're patient with your Basenji and do everything you can to set them up for success, you have a very good chance at a rewarding and long term relationship that will add much more love to your lives.



Visiting White Sands National Park on one of our RV trips



Helping dad with his work



This picture was taken the day this post was written - we love seeing the bond between the boys and Boomer





One last photo - Buddy and his dad exploring the Montana back country