

## *Bringing Home a Shelter Dog*

### **Finding your Animal Companion**

Companion animals add so much to our lives. Many pet owners will admit feeling closer to the animals with whom they share their lives than they do their own human family members from time to time. But, unlike kids who eventually grow up and take care of themselves, our pets will forever be our charges – it is a lifetime commitment.

So making the decision to include a companion animal in our families is not one to be taken lightly. We need to make the most informed decision we can in picking our furry family members.

When it comes to adopting a dog, an important component to the selection is the source. There are several sources from which one can find a wonderful pet: from a reputable breeder, a breed rescue, or a shelter. Unless you've done a great deal of research on breeds and which breeds would be most suitable for your family, the shelter may present the best alternative for the variety of dogs and a staff trained to help you select one.

### **Selecting your Shelter Dog**

While some adopters prefer pure-breed dogs, there are some wonderful advantages to choosing a mixed breed dog. For instance, the behavioral idiosyncrasies of a given breed are often less pronounced in a dog with mixed breed backgrounds. There are also significant health advantages to mixed breed dogs, since selection of breed characteristics can either purposefully or inadvertently exaggerate certain traits that have physiological disadvantages.

### **Life with your new Shelter Dog**

The first three months of your dog's new life in your home will be a time of adjustment and getting acquainted. Little by little, the true personality of your dog will unfold and develop, as will your relationship. There are some hurdles for which you should be prepared.

Dogs in a shelter environment will very likely break housetraining practices, even if they were once water-tight, because life in the shelter can be chaotic and unpredictable. You should expect that part of getting acquainted will be your dog's relearning housetraining.

And because shelter dogs have likely had a previous bonded relationship with another family, they can be prone to developing separation anxiety. This means that they become anxious when left alone, demonstrated through vocalization, house-soiling, destruction or self-mutilation, or anorexic behavior. In an effort to prevent separation anxiety from developing, make sure that, from the very first day that you bring your dog home, you impose periods of separation from you.

A crate can be a crucial tool in both housetraining and in building your dog's tolerance to being without you. It is easiest to introduce the crate on your dog's very first night at home, because it offers a favorable alternative to where he has been sleeping, at the shelter. Introducing it at a later time can be more difficult because, once your dog has gotten comfortable on the sofa and the thick carpet, the crate will not seem quite as attractive.

Your dog's personality will continue to unfold as he settles in to a new life with you. In order to assure that the development is in a positive direction, be aware of behaviors as they surface and, should they be unwelcome, quash them before they grow into a bad habit. Though punishment, when well timed in delivery, can be an effective approach, it is more often

successful to be preventative and to train behaviors that are incompatible with the undesirable behavior. For instance, if your dog jumps on people when greeting, a more acceptable behavior that is incompatible with this is for him to sit politely for visitors. Concocting creative alternatives to behaviors you don't appreciate can be fun and challenging!

Use every opportunity to expose your dog to new (but safe, non-threatening) situations. If you're walking down the street and you pass a fire house with firemen milling about, ask them to help you train your dog by having them offer him a tasty treat. Make a practice of carrying treats, even your dog's whole daily ration of kibble, on walks with you so that he is earning his food for good behavior when exposed to all sorts of new people and situations and, in the process, learning to associate these experiences with good things.

Finally, experiment with different treats and games to find what your dog likes best. Knowing what motivates him will be an essential component to the training process.

## **Resources**

If behaviors start to surface that concern you or that you don't understand, seek help. One alternative is to contact the shelter from which you got the dog. If they can't help you directly, they can probably suggest a trainer who can. Otherwise ask at the dog run, at your doggie day care, or at the local pet shop whether anyone can suggest a trainer. The important thing is to stop the behavior before it takes hold: the more a behavior is rehearsed, the harder it is to eliminate.

## **Deepening the Bond**

There is no better way to bond with your dog than for you to attend training classes together. Much miscommunication springs from the fact that humans communicate verbally while dogs rely on body language. Training not only serves to translate one communication system to another, but it fosters a mutually respectful intra-species relationship.

Dogs thrive on having structure and purpose to their lives, so learn how to tap into the natural traits of your dog's breed(s), channeling them in positive, creative tasks and games, while at the same time discouraging the more troublesome aspects of their behaviors.

And most important, do your best to include your dog into your life. Frequent dog-friendly establishments, patronize pet-friendly hotels, see if you can take your dog to your friends' BBQs. A well-behaved dog will get invited back again and again!

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