

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 a Shelter

The best shelters consider adopting out their animals a very serious business. They want to find just the right pet for a given adopter. So the first sign of a good shelter will be one with a thorough questionnaire that inquires about your family and lifestyle and then tries to match it with an animal with compatible needs. The questionnaire should cover such topics as whether you want a high energy dog and how you plan to exercise your dog each day. Such a thorough process will promise a more successful adoption, a better life for the animal and the people involved and, as a result, fewer animal returns.

Some shelters, such as the Liberty Humane Society in Jersey City, NJ, use foster homes for some of their animals. Dogs who suffer from separation issues or who do not handle the stress of a shelter environment tend to do better living in a foster home until they can be placed. The added advantage of fostering is that the foster parent will become very familiar with the animal, will be able to do some preliminary training to make her more adoptable, and can then share these experiences with an adopter for a smoother transition.

Finally, an adopter should expect to pay an adoption fee for their animal. This not only helps to support the shelter's other animals, but it also ensures that the adopter understands the serious obligations of having a pet.

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.

Shelters should do some form of behavioral assessment of their dogs in order to evaluate certain behavioral criteria. While tests will differ and no test is fail-safe in assessing a dog under every situation, it is well accepted that some form of testing is essential to placing dogs safely in a new home. Dogs are evaluated for ease of handling, behavior around food, and reaction to various different situations and people, as well as their social behavior with other dogs (and cats if so requested). The dog's behavior in these components will help identify the most appropriate family situation. For instance, a dog might be deemed inappropriate for a family with small children because he is a high-spirited large-breed puppy who may play too roughly or because he guarded his food bowl or seemed uncomfortable around children.

It is well within your rights to ask what sort of testing the shelter uses in assessing their dogs and how particular dogs responded in these tests. You might also ask for some suggestions on how to manage any behaviors that might concern you.

An example of the questions you might ask are:

- Is this dog affiliative toward people, seeking their attention, or more independent?
- How is this dog around people he doesn't know? Around children? Around other dogs and animals?
- Does he like to play with other dogs? How is he on leash with other dogs around?
- Is he playful with toys? In play, does he get highly aroused and have trouble calming down afterwards?
- Did this dog guard his food bowl, chewy, or toys? If so, in what way did he guard?
- How does this dog feel about being handled? If he's uncomfortable with anything, in what way did he show it? How is he in the vet's office?

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.

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.

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.

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!