

Courtesy of Animals' Voice and Lorraine Houston



ADOPTING A SHELTER DOG

By Lorraine Houston

Congratulations! You have reached the decision to bring a dog into your life and are now in a position to start your search for the canine companion who will share your heart and home. You have been told or perhaps have read about the many dogs who, through no fault of their own, are waiting for loving homes at animal shelters and have decided to adopt a shelter dog.

Before you start actively looking it is important to ask key questions about yourself and your living situation. Are you away from the home for a working day? Do you have the time and energy to devote to socializing and training a young dog? Would a mature housetrained dog be better suited to you? Are you financially prepared? Do you understand that dogs are companion animals with social needs? Have you chosen a veterinarian? Do you understand that dogs chew, bark and dig? Are you willing to seek advice from a dog trainer? Do you like dog hair? Do you mind scooping poop? Carefully considering your lifestyle, researching the care, commitment and responsibilities of having a dog is the first step toward a successful adoption.

Do you prefer a male or female? Dogs, as in any species, are individuals with their own unique personalities, experiences and genetic make up. I have adopted and fostered both genders and have found that once the dog has been spayed or neutered there is little difference in trainability and adaptability. Many shelters now spay or neuter the dogs in their care prior to adoption, or make arrangements for the surgery.

Do you want a large or small dog? If you are interested in a dog that is one year or older, you will pretty much be looking at a full-grown dog, although some of the giant breeds can grow to two years. If there are puppies available be sure to ask the staff what breed mix they think the puppies are and what the approximate size of the dog will be when full grown. Look not only at the feet, but also at the knee joint. A large thick kneecap typically indicates a large breed dog. Too many people adopt puppies and then return them to the shelter at 10 months because they have grown 'too big'!

Puppy, Teenager or Adult? Contrary to popular belief, you do not have to raise a dog from puppyhood to experience a deep lasting bond and exceptional relationship however, many people want to adopt a puppy to watch them grow, socialize and train them their 'own way'. While this theory is a popular one, bear in mind that a puppy requires a

tremendous amount of time, energy and patience. Statistics have shown that on average, of every three puppies only ONE is still in the original home at one year of age! Young adult dogs or 'teenagers' are said to be the majority of dogs found in shelters and range in age from about 8-18 months. Generally this age group is full of energy that needs some positive, appropriate direction. These dogs may or may not have had some previous training. Either way, I recommend a basic obedience or good manners course to help you and your dog learn to communicate with each other. I beg you not to pass by the older adult dogs. Often these gems are housetrained, not destructive and calm. I have adopted three dogs over the age of 8 years and can not begin to tell you how special each one of them have been. With the advanced medical technology and specialized veterinary services now available, dogs are living longer and healthier lives.

What breed or breed mix should I adopt? Take the time to read about the different breeds and breed groups. This will give you an idea as to origin, grown size, appearance and inherent traits. Be aware that you may see references such as "this breed is gentle with children" or "intelligent, calm and easily trained". Stereotyping a whole breed this way can be very misleading.

Short hair or long? Every dog should be groomed; some require more grooming than others. If you believe that shorthaired breeds such as dalmatians, german shepherds, labradors and beagles don't shed much, please think again! Trust me they shed! Cocker spaniels, poodles, lhasa apsos and yorkshire terriers often need the hand of professional groomer. Longhaired dogs such as collies, sheepdogs and samoyeds collect burrs, leaves and small twigs in their fur often without ever leaving the yard! Be prepared for this if you choose a longer haired dog.

Although adopting a dog often requires a 10-18 year commitment, there are some people who acquire a dog with little forethought or on impulse. Sadly, this is one of the primary reasons you will see so many dear dogs when you make your visit to the shelter. When you arrive at the shelter it may be emotional and upsetting for you to see the many homeless dogs in cages and this can be overwhelming. Typically, you will see dogs of various colours, shapes, sizes and ages. Have a pen and paper handy when you go in the adoption room/s so you can jot down the dogs that you are interested in for later reference when speaking to the shelter staff. On the cages there will be general information about the dog. Often the only information that can be provided is a breed or breed mix, an age and the sex. A history of the dog may not be available if the dog has been admitted as a stray. When an owner surrenders a dog they are asked to fill out a profile sheet to gather information about the dog. This information may or may not be accurate, as some owners do not always mention undesirable traits or behaviours in hopes of a quick adoption. Unfortunately, this does not help the dog or the new owner and can create problems for all involved. Often shelter staff will include observations of their own which they will attach to the cage. For example, if a dog has been keeping the cage clean and holding elimination for outdoor opportunities, you may see a notation that the dog is housebroken.

A kennel situation can be extremely stressful for many dogs and some react differently in small confined areas such as a cage. Some dogs may wiggle and wag and extend a paw out to every passer by, whereas others may sit with their body pressed against the wall shaking. Some dogs have been abandoned by a thoughtless owner and have had to experience life on the street, while others may have lived in quiet home and have never experienced the noise and commotion of a shelter environment.

After you have jotted down the names or cage numbers of the dogs you are interested in, you may want to ask a shelter staff member for his/her insight or opinion. Explain your lifestyle and home environment. Their knowledge and experience with the dogs in their care can be invaluable. Many shelters ask you to fill out an adoption application to gain the information needed to make a successful match. I strongly encourage all members of the family be present for this big decision, some shelters even require it. In the case where children are part of the family you will want to be sure that some form of interaction has taken place prior to adopting. I suggest if you have another dog at home, s/he have an opportunity to meet the shelter dog you are interested in. Most shelters have a 'socializing' or 'meeting' area where these interactions can take place and if one is not available, perhaps one of the staff would agree to accompany you on a walk with the dog. You may wish to visit several shelters and visit them often before making your final choice. Adopting a dog is a life time commitment which requires an informed, well-educated and sensible decision. It's my bet that if more people made this type of decision before acquiring a dog there would be fewer homeless dogs all around!