

Where to Adopt a Family Pet. Part Two

By Jane Marshall. Dog Trainer

Between four to six million homeless dogs are euthanized in American shelters every year. Hearing this, you decide you want to make an ethical choice and be “part of the solution” by adopting a homeless dog as your new family pet.

The shelter is the first place you think of looking. But there are other deserving dogs in rescue groups, adoption centers, sanctuaries, on the internet and in the newspaper. Which is the best choice for your new family pet?

Animal shelters always have a wide selection of dogs of all ages, breeds and personalities. They are a particularly good place, in this area, to find puppies. Although the majority of dogs will be mixes, purebreds can also be found there. According to the HSUS (Humane Society of the United States) 25% of dogs entering animal shelters are purebred. If you are looking for a particular breed or size (small dogs tend to be harder to find as they are adopted quickly) if you are patient, and keep checking back, you will find exactly what you are looking for.

If the thought of taking home an adult dog with an unknown history is worrying to you ask the shelter if they evaluate their dogs before adoption. Dog trainers and behaviorists now use standardized tests to assess dogs for adoptability. Historically shelters have tried to adopt out as many dogs as possible. Recently, however, there has been a shift in philosophy. Modern shelters are trying to focus on promoting temperamentally sound dogs and matching them well with suitable families. Sweet natured dogs are more likely to stay in their adoptive homes permanently. This reduces the cycle of dogs returned to the shelter and also promotes a good image of shelter dogs in the community.

Look for good descriptions of the dogs on their kennels. Information that should be available to you should be a good guess at the breed (or mix) of the dog, his age, whether the dog may be housetrained, his personality (including energy level) and the sort of home he would do well in.

Most shelters will spay or neuter your new pet and give basic shots. Sometimes microchipping is available. As veterinary technicians and sometimes even veterinarians are now employed by shelters, you are usually made aware of any health problems before you finalize the adoption.

If the thought of kennels full of pleading eyes is too distressing and overwhelming, then choosing a dog from a rescue group may be a good compromise for you. Many rescue groups get their dogs from shelters anyway. Usually their dogs are kept in foster homes. This gives you a nice opportunity to spend time with the dog in a relaxed home setting. It may be possible to make several visits and think through whether this is the right dog for

you. Another advantage is that the foster home may have already house trained the dog and taught her some basic house manners. Look, carefully at the dog's daily routine. You want to take home a dog who is living in a situation similar to the one you will require her to live in. If the dog has been living with 10 other dogs in a fenced yard, the transition to being an only dog in an apartment may be too difficult.

Look out for dogs that are excessively shy. Young dogs need a lot of socialization to develop their confidence. If the foster home has multiple dogs, that level of attention may not have been possible. Excessively shy dogs do not get better with simple TLC in their new homes. Shyness can lead to numerous problems including separation anxiety and even fear aggression. A friendly, sociable dog who comes to greet you is a better bet.

Like shelters, rescue groups usually spay and neuter the dog for you and provide basic health care, all at a fraction of what it would cost for you to take a dog to the vets yourself.

What about sanctuaries and adoption centers? Here again, there are so many deserving animals with dedicated staff hoping you will take home one of their dogs. Sanctuaries often attract people because of the "no kill" philosophy. Often, these places take in any dog they have space for and are committed to finding a home for all of them, even dogs dog's with behavior problems. However, many of these dogs, through no fault of their own will not make good family pets. Look carefully at the conditions the dog is being kept in. Can a dog who has spent four years in a cage adapt to your busy family environment? Ask why a dog has spent so long there. If in doubt, take along a dog trainer who specializes in evaluating dogs to help you make a good choice.

Adoption centers usually have a different philosophy. Like the new APS of Orange County Adoption Center, their emphasis is on only taking in highly adoptable dogs that have been screened to enter their program . These dogs are then carefully matched with appropriate families. Ongoing support after adoption ensures the match is permanent and successful. This is probably the best choice for you if you are a first time dog owner or have small children. Studies have shown that these two groups of people surrender dogs back to shelters in greater numbers than the general population.

And what about those "free" dogs in the newspaper. If the dog is not spayed or neutered and has no basic health care, he will end up costing you three to four times more than your shelter or rescue dog, not exactly "free" after all.

And the internet dogs? If you are making an ethical choice to adopt a homeless dog, bear in mind that puppy mills and unscrupulous dealers sometimes pass themselves off as rescue groups on the internet. Also taking a dog into you home without seeing it is a risky venture (how many "blind dates" were successful for you!). Stick with your local dogs who are in need of a home and support the local organizations who are working against the odds to save so many deserving animals.

