

Choosing a Shelter Dog

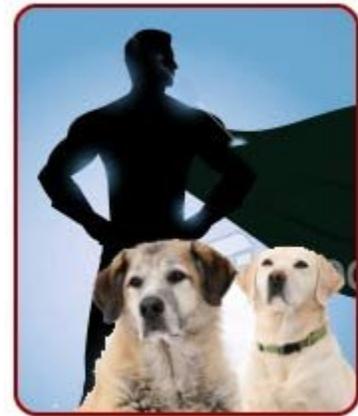
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There's an old saying that applies to just about everything in life, "Well begun, half done"

I will preface the following article by stating that it is not my intention to discourage you from adopting a rescue dog. In fact, if you refer to my prior Rescue Reporter article you'll see that there are several advantages to adopting a dog through a shelter. My dog, Pepper, is a rescue who spent almost two years in a shelter. Today, she's a wonderful best friend.

Any shelter worker/volunteer will tell you that it is a heart breaking experience to see a dog returned to a shelter by new adopters. The heart break of doing so also extends to the dog's new family, as dreams have been dashed and high expectations turned to disappointment. Finally, one can imagine the trauma to the dog when it is returned, once again, abandoned.



If you consider a few important issues prior to beginning your rescue search, your understanding will be greater, your focus will be narrowed and your chances of adopting the right dog, the first time, are vastly increased.

Buyer Awareness

Most advice about the rescue process starts with recommendations about making assessments of your life style and then fitting a dog to that style. Factors such as the dog's age, gender, energy level, behavioral patterns, comfort level with children and other pets etc. are all important considerations.

Clearly, this is sound advice and is a very important factor in successful dog adoption.

But I'd like you to consider a few questions before addressing the above.

Are you aware of the potential downsides to rescuing a dog from a shelter and how to identify them?

I am not suggesting that one should "identify and avoid" the potential downsides, rather what I am suggesting is that the downsides be identified and considered.

Far too many people enter into the adoption process with a romanticized perspective about how appreciative the dog will be, as if that will somehow translate into the dog having good manners. Many people also become so wrapped up in the "feel good" experience of rescuing a dog, they lose perspective of the more mundane logistics, pitfalls, and responsibilities.

A Bit of Science

It's always easier to condition a dog to behave in a desired manner if you start with a blank slate. If the dog already has formed a negative association between two events and you want to change the behavior that is triggered by that association, this will require substantially more training time and repetitions than if the dog didn't have a prior association.

Let's take a look at the above in English:

What if Pavlov performed his experiment differently? For example, what would have happened if each time he rang his bell, instead of giving his dogs food, Pavlov administered a shock. Eventually, the dogs would have built an association, bell ring = discomfort. The more this was repeated, the stronger the association would have become. Let's say Pavlov then wanted to change the conditioned expectation to "bell ring = food" he would need to pair the two new events, the bell ringing and food, through repeated repetition in order to change the association from the prior one. While this is an achievable goal, it's very possible the dog's association between the two events will never be as strong as it could have been if the prior negative association never existed.

What does this mean in real life?

As an example, there are times when a shelter dog demonstrates a negative association towards people approaching him/her during feedings, or while playing with a toy or chewing a bone. He will exhibit guarding behaviors which can lead to injury or worse. This guarding behavior is referred to as resource guarding or possession aggression. The process required to change this behavior is a serious one. It would include specific steps, rehearsed over time, in hopes that the dog's perception of approaching humans would no longer be considered a threat, but rather a welcomed sight so that the desire to guard would diminish or extinguish all together. The success of this counter conditioning program can only be achieved through practice, patience and the counsel of a professional trainer. We also must accept that there is a possibility that the behavior will never be reliably changed.

Several similar issues can develop with shelter dogs who have not experienced positive interactions and positive reinforcement training on a consistent basis while in the shelter's care. Shelters that don't have a formal, written protocol for how employees and volunteers must interact with dogs are a high risk. It is perfectly within your rights to ask to see their formal guidelines. Be aware as well, that shelters that employ archaic, aversive training methods should also be considered a high risk as these methods tend to cause many behavioral issues. If the shelter employs the use of choke or prong collars for their dogs, it's a sign that the shelter is probably using aversive training methods for the dogs. Again, it is perfectly within your right to ask about the training methods employed by the shelter.

Clearly, the longer a dog has been at a shelter that doesn't embrace positive training techniques or formal interaction guidelines, the greater the chances for negative associations and behavioral problems.

Garbage in; Garbage out

Additionally, it's important to ask what brand of food the shelter feeds the dogs. While many shelters face financial hardships, this is not an excuse for feeding low quality foods to the dogs. Again, the longer the dog has been fed low quality foods, the greater the chance for health issues. More importantly, knowingly feeding dogs low quality dog foods is a statement about the shelter's attitude toward their dogs.

If you would like a quality review of a particular dog food, please feel free to [contact me](#).

Be a Good Detective

A great way to get a sense of behavioral issues at shelter is to review the on-line bio's of each dog in the shelter's care.

If you see a lot of "not good sharing possessions" or other euphemisms for resource guarding, chances are the shelter has resource guarding issues with their dogs because no formal, positive program is in place to avoid the development of this behavior.

Other examples:

- An inordinate number of the shelter's dogs aren't good with other dogs;
- An inordinate number of the shelter's dogs shouldn't be adopted by families with children;
- Several dogs have been at the shelter for a long period of time.

Any behavioral problem that repeatedly appears in the bios of different dogs, is a sign that the shelter is not doing a good job of keeping the dogs in a positive mindset.

Summing Up

In summation, a dog shelter is like any other business that is selling a product. How the business maintains its inventory is a very important factor to consider when making your purchase decision. When the product is a living being, such as a dog, it's that much more important.

In a future column I'll be writing about my experience with my adult rescue pooch, Pepper, who came home with me after spending 1 1/2 years at a shelter.

Indeed, she was a challenge; a very worthwhile and rewarding challenge. She's a great friend and wonderful companion.

Climbing a mountain is a great challenge and very rewarding when the climber reaches the top. But planning and utilizing correct equipment are critical components of a successful climb. Impulsively deciding to make the climb wearing flip flops and Bermuda shorts probably isn't a great idea.

Similarly, not doing your homework before bringing home a rescue dog can result in a less than rewarding experience.