

Proper Training for Adoption

Before choosing a shelter dog, learn how to 'read' him

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Adopting a dog from a shelter is one of the kindest acts you could commit. But, if you are not particularly dog savvy and the shelter is not very proactive, it also could be one of the most frustrating.



"I don't think people should be out on their own" when choosing a shelter dog, says Sue Sternberg, founder of the Community Animal Shelter Association and author of "Successful Dog Adoption" (Howell, \$16.99). "It's like asking someone to go to a blood bank and pick their own blood."

Indeed, shelters vary wildly in the screening and temperament-testing they do, as well as the guidance and resources they offer adopters. To that end, Sternberg's book is a must for anyone who needs to learn how to "read" a dog before bringing one home.

Sternberg knows from shelters. Ten years ago, she started her own, Rondout Valley Animals for Adoption in Accord, N.Y. "I wanted mine to be a place that seemed really positive. I didn't want someone adopting because they were feeling sorry for the dog," she says. To that end, animals are housed in brightly painted rooms, complete with furniture and piped-in music.

Sternberg's Web site, www.suesternberg.com, offers a virtual tour of her shelter. But even better, tonight at 7:30, HBO airs "Shelter Dogs," an "America Undercover" documentary that chronicles a year in the life of Sternberg's no-kill facility.

Sternberg acknowledges that shelters have gotten more progressive in recent years, "with more behavior and training departments now than ever before." Still, she adds, "for every great dog that's up for adoption," there are others who are potentially aggressive. "I think shelters have a responsibility to know their dogs' behavior and temperament, and to put up appropriate matches."

But most times, it falls to potential adopters to decide whether an animal just has a behavioral problem that can be fixed with some training and constancy - or a temperament issue that is an indelible part of who the dog is. In addition to the temperament tests outlined in her book, Sternberg offers these suggestions:

Make no excuses for the dog. "What happens with humans and dogs is we get incredibly emotionally involved with them, and it covers up any logic we have," Sternberg says. Be realistic about the dog in front of you. "If it appears incredibly hyperactive, jumping up all over you, it probably is."

Leave the kids at home. Bring children to the shelter only when you have narrowed down your potential prospects. Sternberg suggests that anyone with small children hire a professional

trainer or behaviorist to temperament-test a dog before adopting.

Don't be a "breed-ist." One of the pluses of temperament testing is that it allows a dog to be judged as an individual. "People say, 'Here's a Lab - they're good with kids'" - which might not be the case with every Lab you meet.

Conversely, there is the much-maligned pit bull, to which Sternberg devotes a whole section of her book. "As with any breed," she says, "some are more safe and appropriate companion dogs and some are born aggressive and unmodifiable."

Look for a truly social dog. A people-oriented dog will send you signals: It will have a soft, squinty eye, and will lower its tail when you pet it. (A dog that carries its tail high is likely dominant.)

Most of all, a social dog will gently snuggle up against you. "He should do that on coming out of the cage," Sternberg says. "A shelter dog has been deprived of a lot of things, but he's mostly been deprived of human contact. He'll want that more than relieving his bladder or exercise."

Consider an adolescent or adult dog. "So many people think you can't bond to an older dog, or if you got a puppy you can avoid all these problems, and that's just not true," Sternberg says.

Indeed, adult dogs - especially seniors - often have fewer problems than their younger counterparts. "They're ready-made, complete companions," she adds. "They don't chew, and can be left home alone. They're just the gems."

Don't judge a dog by its surroundings. Oftentimes, people pigeonhole dogs by the kind of shelter they are in, concluding - wrongly - that no-kill shelters contain better dogs than kill shelters. "The dog of your dreams could be anywhere," Sternberg reminds. "Look for the right dog, not the best facility."

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