Adopting a Dog? MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICE!

There's one problem with adopting a dog from an animal shelter: the selection of available canine companions can overwhelm you! Man's best friends come in all shapes, sizes, and, of course, personalities.

The good news is that almost any shelter dog can make a wonderful, lifelong companion for you and your family. The bad news is that some of those bundles of energy will make less appropriate pets for you than others.

The key is simply knowing what to look for! Here are a few things to think about:

Examine Yourself

Choosing the right dog generally means identifying the type of animal who matches your lifestyle and wants. If you live alone in a small, third-floor apartment, for instance, adopting a large, active retriever mix might not be the best choice. Conversely, if you've got a family of four and are looking for a companion to match your active family lifestyle, such an animal may be the perfect choice. A dog's size, exercise requirements, friendliness, assertiveness, and compatability with children should all figure into your decision.

Learn About Different Breeds and Mixes

So how do you know what kinds of dogs will have the qualities you're looking for? The best way to find out is to learn about various breeds, visit with animals at the shelter, and speak with an adoption counselor for guidance.

Dogs fall into one of two categories: purebreds or mixed breeds. Most animal shelters have plenty of both. The only significant difference between the two is that purebreds, because their parents and other ancestors are all members of the same breed, generally conform to a specific "breed standard." This means that if you adopt a puppy who is a purebred, you have a good chance of knowing how big he'll get when he gets older and what general physical and behavioral characteristics he's likely to have.

Of course, the size, appearance, and temperament of most mixed breed dogs can be predicted as well. After all, mixed breeds are simply combinations of different breeds. So if you can recognize the ancestry of a particular mixed breed puppy, you have a good chance of knowing how he'll turn out, too.

Mixed breeds offer several other advantages. When you adopt a mixed breed, you have the benefit of getting the combined traits of two or more different breeds in one animal. You also get a dog who's likely to be free of genetic defects common to certain purebred dogs. Mixed breeds, in fact, are often considered the more "natural" dog. When you adopt a mixed breed, you adopt a totally unique companion.

Visit With Shelter Animals

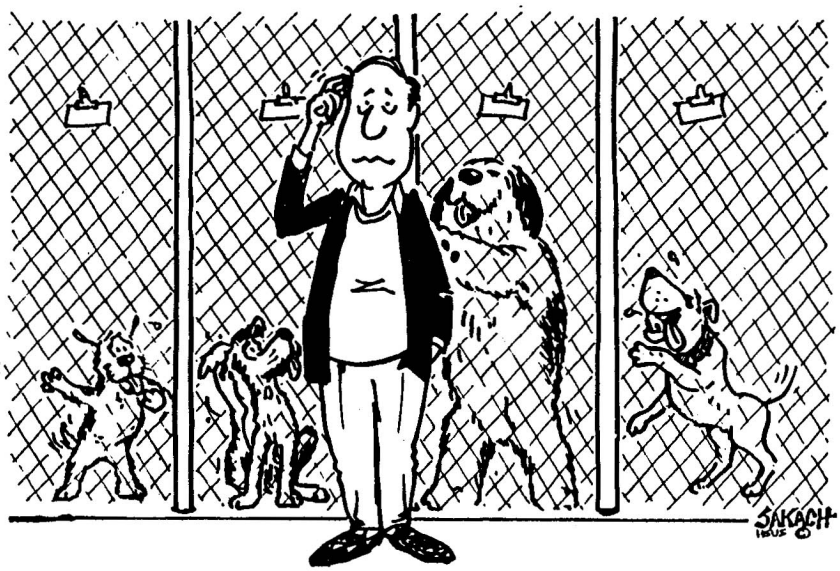
While you're at the shelter, keep in mind that the shelter is a stressful place for any animal. Quite often, a dog's true colors won't show until he's away from other animals and the shelter environment. So even if you walk past a kennel with a dog who isn't vying for your attention, don't count him out. He may just be a little scared or lonely.

An adoption counselor can help you select canine candidates who'll match what you're looking for. When you spend time with each animal, you'll want to ask yourself:

How old is the dog? You may want to select a puppy as your new companion. However, young dogs usually require much more training and supervision than more mature dogs. If you lack the time or patience to housebreak your pup or to correct problems like chewing and jumping, then an adult dog may be a better choice.

How shy or assertive is the dog? Although an active, bouncy dog might catch your eye, a more quiet or reserved dog might be easier to live with and care for.

How good is the animal with children? Learning about a dog's past through a history sheet or from an adoption counselor can be helpful here, but past information isn't always available. In general, a dog who is active, likes to be touched, and is not sensitive to handling and noise is a dog who'll probably thrive in a house full of kids. Also keep in mind that puppies under four months of age, because of their fragility and special needs, often won't be adopted out to families with children less than six years old.



Choose a Pal for Life

Every dog in the shelter can provide you with boundless love and companionship, and every dog certainly deserves a lifelong home. But some dogs are better for you and your lifestyle than others. That's why you should take the time to make a thoughtful choice. After all, you're choosing a pal who'll be with you 10, 15, or even more years. Select the right dog, and you and your new companion will enjoy those years to the fullest.

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