

Pets and People: Making a Match



The people who help adopt out dogs and cats probably take more pains to match their animal to prospective owners than anyone. They know the dogs and cats at their shelter need another chance. Sometimes it's more than a second chance. It may be a third, or even a fourth chance, and they want it to work. A person can't simply walk through the doors of a shelter, look at the animals, and say, "I want that one."

Every shelter has its own way of matching people to animals, but there are usually many similarities. Martha Wyss of the Friends of Animals Foundation in Los Angeles begins the process by spreading the word about the shelter and the animals they have for adoption.

"We advertise in the *Los Angeles Times* four days a week," Ms. Wyss explained. We also have a website, put up signs, do telephone work, and appear occasionally on television."

People who come to the shelter to adopt are interviewed about their home situation and the kind of care they plan to give the animal. If they already have an animal, the shelter will ask them to bring that animal in so it too can be evaluated. They also want to

see how the animal will react to the animal that is to be adopted out. In effect, they are trying to make sure the adoption will work.

“We always deliver the animal that is being adopted,” Wyss says. “We insist on seeing the situation one of our animals will be going into.”

That doesn’t mean that everyone who wants an animal gets one. “We weed out many people right on the telephone,” Wyss continues. “If they know absolutely nothing about animals, we don’t really want them. If they say they are going to keep the animal outside all the time, we won’t adopt to them. We stand behind all the animals we adopt out and we will take them back, even after five years.”

It’s a similar situation at the American Foundation for Animal Rescue. People wanting to adopt must fill out an application with references that will be checked. The Foundation wants all its adopted animals to live inside a house with its family. Animal behaviorists, such as Bob DeFranco, evaluate the situation to make sure that people are matched to the right animal.

“I would say that 75 percent of our adoptions work,” DeFranco says. “If one doesn’t we will almost always take the animal back, but we also work with people and expect them to make an effort to make it work.”

Both Martha Wyss and Bob DeFranco have seen a similar phenomenon. If an animal is brought in that has serious injuries, or has been badly abused, or perhaps rescued from a very precarious situation, it is adopted almost immediately, with many people calling about it.

“Any animal that gets media attention is adopted quickly,” DeFrano says. “It’s as if it gives people fulfillment to help, say, a dog that has lost a leg or a cat that has been burned. What they should realize is that all the animals need help.”

Know What You Want

Those who want to adopt can help the matching process by knowing what they want before they go to the shelter. If a family is living in a small place and decides upon a small dog, they shouldn’t change their mind because a big, lovable dog seems to like the kids. That same lovable dog may need a lot of room to run and exercise, something none of you can easily provide.

If your best friend has a dog and a cat at home, and you only have a dog you must be careful about adding a cat. It doesn’t always work. That’s why many shelters will want you to bring your existing animal to them before they agree to an adoption. If your dog has a history of chasing cats, chances are the two animals will not get along.

Families must also discuss possible negatives. If the kids forget to walk the dog, are the parents willing to do it? If a dog or cat puts some scratches on the parents’ good furniture, are the kids willing to try to train it, or will the parents immediately return it to the shelter? If the dog vomits in the house, will the kids learn how to clean it up? An animal isn’t like a toy. When you finish playing with it, you can’t just put it away.

All these things should be decided before you even go to the shelter. Then an adoption counselor or animal behaviorist will work with you on a final decision. You will be asked you again if you really want to adopt as well as help get you the best animal for

your situation. You have to trust in their judgment. They do it every day and they are only looking out for the welfare of the animal. You must remember that you are making a commitment to a dog or cat who has probably been let down once or twice before by its previous owners. You shouldn't let that happen again.

Understanding Your Adopted Pet

Whether you are adopting a dog or cat, or getting a brand new puppy or kitten from another source, you should learn all you can about that animal. Both dogs and cats have a number of behaviors that they will bring to your home from the wild. They will do some of the same things their ancestors did thousands of years ago. The more you know about these behaviors, the better you will understand your pet. It's important for any animal you have, but especially important if you are adopting for the first time. The more you understand, the better chance there is for the adoption to work.

For example, you may take your dog outside one day and, before you can stop him, he starts rolling in some very smelly stuff on the grass. He isn't doing this because he likes to be dirty. Sometimes, he may just find the scent very appealing, even though you think it's awful. But he may also be doing it for another reason. Dogs and wolves, in the wild, sometimes roll in something with a strong odor to cover their own scent. That way, if they are hunting, their prey won't pick up their scent and run away. Though your dog isn't going hunting, the instinct to roll in different scents still remains.

Cats too have leftover behaviors from the wild. You might be sitting in your room one night doing your homework when your cat comes in. To your surprise, she suddenly

drops a dead mouse or other small animal at your feet. At first, you may think this is disgusting. To the cat, however, it is something else. Ancestors of the cat in the wild (including lions and tigers) are known to bring their prey to other cats as a social gesture. So your cat is simply bringing you a present. She likes you. Don't scold her. Just dispose of the dead animal and understand why your cat brought it to you.

You can learn more about these animal behaviors by reading two previous books in this series, *Becoming Your Dog's Best Friend* and *Becoming Your Cat's Best Friend*. The more you know about your pet, the better owner and friend you will be. □



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