

## Why Not Adopt?



Anyone wanting to get a cat or a dog for the first time should consider adoption. In fact, if you or your family want to add a second or third animal, adopting may also be the best way to go. Not only would you be helping to give an unwanted animal a home, but a good shelter can match you with a pet that is right for you and save you money at the same time. To consider adopting as an option, you would also be showing a responsible approach to having a pet. The lack of responsibility on the part of pet owners is another major reason for the existence of so many unwanted pets. It is important to consider these and other factors when deciding if adoption is right for you.

### The Responsibility of Pet Ownership

It may come as a surprise to learn that not everyone who owns a dog or cat really loves the animal. Many obtain an animal for the wrong reasons. Then as soon as something changes in their lives, the animal is the first to go. Instead of thinking of their pet as a living thing—a family member with feelings, emotions, and needs—they think of it as a piece of property that can be thrown away. It's almost like an old magazine. If you don't want it anymore, get rid of it.

“Owning a companion animal [dog or cat] is a lifetime commitment,” says Bob DeFranco, president of the American Foundation for Animal Rescue in Rego Park, New York, and a trained animal behaviorist. “That animal has no one to depend upon but you.”

Any person or family wanting a pet or pets must want it for the right reasons. Not only must they know which pet, or which breed, is right for them, but they must also know something about that animal and be willing to give it love, attention, and medical care for its entire life. To get a pet with the attitude that if it doesn't work out we'll just get rid of it means you are contributing to the huge problem of too many unwanted animals.

“I had a recent situation where a father brought a dog in to us that he wanted to put up for adoption,” says Linda Rice-Mandigo, an adoption counselor at the Dutchess Country S.P.C.A. in Hyde Park, New York. “He was a nice man who told me he got the dog for his three kids. But instead of making the dog an integral part of their lives, the kids were tying the dog up outside every afternoon when they came home from school and neglecting it. The father said it was his fault. Each of his children had their own color TV and computer in their rooms and had no time for the dog.

“I'm afraid we're developing a generation of kids who are 'possession people.' A dog becomes just another possession, like a Nintendo game. With a pet, the whole family should be involved.”

The stories are endless. People continue to get animals for the wrong reasons, or simply get the wrong animal. Unhappy animals seldom spend their entire lives under one

roof. Sooner or later they are loose on the streets or left on the doorstep of an animal shelter or dog pound. Others go from one bad owner to another. All these situations result from pet owners not accepting their responsibility, with the animals being put to sleep or put up for adoption.

### **Think First, Act Later**

If you get a puppy or a kitten, that animal will have an average natural lifespan of between 10 and 15 years, sometimes longer. Will your home situation support this? If you have children who are 10 or older when you get the dog, chances are they will leave the house for school or to be on their own while the animal is still alive. Will someone in the household still be willing to care for their aging pet? If a pet is suddenly given up after many years it can be a devastating experience for that animal. If your children are older and want a pet, you might be better off adopting an older dog instead of a puppy that might be in the home longer than the children.

Many other important questions need to be answered. Do you live in a small apartment, or do you have a house with a backyard? If you want a dog, are you better off with a small dog or a large one? Is someone willing to walk it when necessary? If it is a large, willful breed, are you willing to take the animal to the animal obedience school? Do you know the characteristics of the breed? It is hyperactive? Does it tend to be protective and aggressive? Does it need a great deal of hard exercise? Will someone be home most of the time so the dog doesn't have to spend long periods confined and alone?

If you don't think about things like this, you may be making a mistake. Get a dog for the wrong reasons, and it won't work. If you don't give a large dog enough exercise, it could become destructive in your home. If you tie a dog outside all day, it can become territorial and aggressive. If you leave your dog alone for long periods of time, it will be lonely and unhappy. In the wild, dogs are social, pack animals. When you get a dog, you become its pack or family. It wants to be near you and interact with you. It doesn't want to be tied to a doghouse, no matter how great that might be.

The same goes for a cat. The questions may be different, but they must be considered nevertheless. As a rule, cats are clean, quiet, and can be left alone more than dogs. They also use a litter box and don't have to be walked. But cats can also get into many things. They can jump up on the furniture, put scratch marks on table legs, and knock things off desks, shelves, and just about anything else. If you have small animals in the house, such as birds or hamsters, the cat may decide to hunt. Once trained, however, cats can be a nearly perfect apartment pet.

If you live in the country you must watch your cat more carefully. If you let it out it can fight with other cats (especially if it's an un-neutered male), can begin to kill birds and other beneficial animals, and can be exposed to traffic hazards. So once again, you must be sure to be a responsible and thinking owner.

Never make a hasty decision when getting a pet. Talk it over as a family. If you have questions, find someone who knows and cares about animals. Never decide to "try it" for awhile just to see if it works out. Be sure. If no one is home often, only consider animals that won't mind being left for periods of time. A cat is a better choice than a dog

in this situation. These are all points that should be addressed before you get a dog or a cat. Then, if you finally decide you will be a responsible owner and make a commitment to your new pet, you must make the final choice- to buy or adopt.

### **Consider the Options**

People are getting dogs and cats all the time. Despite the overflow of unwanted animals, there are also many thousands of new pet owners each year. A large number of them are getting a pet for the first time. Others are getting a second pet, maybe a third. Some have decided to add a cat to a household that already has a dog. Others wonder about bringing a cat into a home where there are already small animals, such as parakeets or hamsters.

The next question is: where to get the pet? At first, most people seem to want to start with a young puppy or a kitten. In some situations, however, an older animal will fit a person or family's needs better. Older dogs are usually housebroken and neutered. Older cats are quieter and not as wildly playful. Shelters often have puppies and kittens, as well. Adoption has certain advantages that everyone should know.

Unless you and your family have a good reason for wanting a certain kind of purebred dog or cat, you should seriously consider adopting. A no-kill shelter or animal-rescue organization will tell you about the dogs and cats they have for adoption and try to match the right one for you. These animals have all been checked by a veterinarian and are usually up-to-date on their shots.

Most animals at a shelter have been through some difficult times. People who run the shelter want these animals to finally have loving, stable homes, so they try to make sure they are adopted by the right person or family. Because unwanted pets are so abundant, someone wishing to adopt will have a wide choice. With dogs, you can pick from large or small, puppy or older animal, a quiet or lively pet, a purebred or a mix. If you want to adopt, you aren't limited. You can go to a shelter and see which animal wins your heart. By adopting, you will not only provide a loving home to a dog that needs one very badly, but will also feel good in knowing that you have joined the fight to help the many unwanted animals.

The majority of cats at shelters are mixed breeds. Not as many people, however, look for purebred cats as for dogs. So it is important to consider adopting a cat because many are available. Again, you will have a wide choice because the cats usually are of all ages and many pretty colors. There are kittens as well as older cats, and the people running the shelter will tell you if a cat is cuddly and affectionate, or more standoffish. They can tell you which ones are best suited for an apartment and for a rural setting, as well as which ones fit in best with other cats.

The bottom line is simple. If you and your family are sure you want to add a dog or a cat to your household, think about adopting. If you do, you'll get a family pet that will give you years of unconditional love.

### **A Few Words about Buying**

If you are deciding whether to adopt a dog, you might also be thinking about a puppy. Many people buy puppies when they could just easily adopt. They may want a

certain kind of purebred dog and will go to a breeder recommender by the American Kennel Club. This is fine if it's really what they want. They will probably pay a great deal for the dog, but will also know its "bloodlines." That means they will see the parents, and know if the animals won ribbon at dog shows and are considered champions.

But the majority of people do it another way. They go to a pet shop. Today, pet shops are located in almost every large shopping mall in the country. Most of these have a puppy section, which a variety of purebreds in small cages behind a glass partition. Many families shopping at the mall on a weekend walk into these stores and look at the puppies. Maybe your family has even done it. If there are small children with the family, chances are they will look at the cute, fluffy little pups and say, "I want one."

In this situation, people will sometimes buy a puppy on impulse. They will make a decision about something they haven't thought about before. Out comes the credit card, and home goes the new puppy. Unfortunately, what seems like a great family outing resulting in a new pet often turns into a horrible, high-priced mistake. It can be a mistake that soon results in a bad situation for the animal.

Many problems come with buying a dog this way. For openers, you may not be getting a totally healthy animal. Most pet shops get their puppies from commercial breeders who turn out dogs the way a bottling plant turns out soda. The nickname for these breeding establishments are *puppy mills*. For years, reputable breeders and animal lovers have been trying to close down many of these "dog factories," or at least have more state and federal restrictions placed upon them.

What exactly is a puppy mill? It is a place where dogs are bred strictly for profit and with very little regard to the breeding females, the safe handling of the puppies, or the socialization of the young animals. At a puppy mill, a female will spend its entire life in a small cage, being bred every time she comes into season or “heat.” They will continue to breed the animal twice a year, never giving her a rest and with little or no regard to her health. It is a miserable life.

Puppy mills have been in existence since the 1960s when dogs were often bred for medical research. Now they supply puppies to the retail pet industry, namely pet shops. Many of these places breed dogs in dirty, unhealthy conditions. No one knows how many dogs and puppies die there, never having a chance to find a home. Though they produce purebred dogs, the puppy mills take no pains to match up top-quality dogs so they will produce the best examples of each breed — both in physical stature and personality. The parents are often mismatched.

Buying from a pet shop, you are also going to be paying as much or even more than you would pay a reputable breeder. Chances are you will probably be talking to someone who knows very little about the personality of each breed. If something goes wrong with the purchase, it becomes your problem. Buying from a pet shop is risky.

Such risks can be avoided by adoption. By deciding to adopt, you will come in contact with people who not only love dogs and cats but also give their time and effort to finding the right homes for animals that no one wants. □

---

□ Chapter 2 of *Adopting Pets: How to Choose Your New Best Friend*. Copyright © 2001 by Bill Gutman. Reprinted with permission of Bill Gutman. Image from: *Adopting Pets: How to Choose Your New Best Friend*. Copyright © 2001 by Bill Gutman. Reprinted with permission of The Millbrook Press, Inc.. All rights reserved.