



## **LOOKING BETWEEN THE BARS**

*How to best pick the right dog for you and your family*  
-- Elaine Allison, CPDT

### **An age old question: Advantages/Disadvantages**

#### **Puppies (7wks-9months)-Advantages:**

- Extremely malleable, like fuzzy play dough.
- Most realistic best case scenario in adding an additional dog to an already doggy home.
- High cuteness!!

#### **Puppies-Disadvantages**

- Blank slates that need EVERYTHING shown to them!
- Time intensive, if you don't have lots of time to train, get an older dog.
- The great unknown: hips, elbows and other genetic health problems may pop up despite your best efforts. Cute German Shepherds who bunny hop when they are young, may turn into expensive (monetarily, physically and emotionally) problems later in life.

#### **Adolescents/Young Adults (9-18 Months)-Advantages:**

- Biggest pool to pick from in shelter
- Still very trainable
- May have some training

#### **Adolescents/Young Adults-Disadvantages:**

- Anything "real" behaviorally will rear its ugly little head in this time frame.
- Behavior may have been the most common reason they were surrendered to shelter.
- Teens are trying!! Easily 65% of our clients are in this age group.

#### **Adult/Senior Dogs (2-8 yrs)**

- What you see is what you get
- Hips and elbows are most likely "set"
- In general, more sedate versions of their younger selves-lower maintenance, some training for your new home will be required!

#### **Adult/Senior Dogs-Disadvantages**

- What you see is what you get
- Still trainable but most "hard wired" behaviors can only be realistically managed.
- May need ongoing medical care as they age. Choose wisely. This could end up catastrophically expensive with a dog with many medical problems.



### **Before you walk in the door:**

- **Define!** What kind of dog owner are you, or do you want to be? Your new dog should fit your lifestyle, not the other way around. You choose the dog. The dog doesn't choose you. Think about what you'd like to do with your new dog. Do you envision long hours at the dog park? Don't pick a shy, fearful or aloof dog-they will be miserable. Instead, try to find a nice even tempered goober who isn't too over the top and has the physicality to run for long periods of time.
- **Look with your head and your head:** Your heart will follow! Making emotional choices can work against the best of intentions. Remember you are not only deciding for yourself. You are changing the dog's life, your family's and yours. Choosing a dog solely on someone else's recommendation, an expiration date on a kennel card or a dog who looks much like the dog you just had to let go of, can lead to very big problems and hard choices later on.
- **Tell a friend:** Taking someone with you whether it be a professional or a friend can really help keep you objective in a sea of fuzzy faces.
- **What if?** Be very clear about the shelter or rescue's return policy as well as their placement protocol. If they don't have clearly defined answers to both, look elsewhere.
- **The big picture:** Take into consideration size, grooming breed generalities and initial first impressions. Example: You enjoy grooming your dog-see how your prospective adoptee reacts to handling. The prettiest dog who is snappy during handling doesn't fit your picture. Find one who actually likes to be brushed and enjoys the attention a pretty girl generates.
- **Littermates:** People like the idea of puppies going home together. However, it is perhaps better to not adopt two from the same litter. No one fights like family! Simply, littermates are usually too much alike and unhealthy over bonded dogs that can't function without the other is no way for a dog to spend their life.
- **Children & Dogs:** It's very cut and dried: any dog who is willing to use their mouth aggressively over food, bones, space or has an over reactive startle reflex is not a dog for a house with children. Who would do best is an unflappable galoot whose initial response to children is a "Hey hi!" even tempered greeting.
- **Be very selective:** Bring children in after you have made some possible choices. Don't allow children to make this all important decision. Make sure the staff knows the ages of your children. While many pit bulls make fantastic pet dogs, terriers and toddlers can also make for a very volatile combination.



### When you are actually there

- **Tour the whole facility.** Then go back to any dog that has caught your eye.
- **First impression?** This is hard in a shelter. There are many considerations. Time in the shelter is a big factor. They can get progressively reactive or simply shut off after only a few days. What I think is important to consider is how they have reacted and how quickly do they recover from it? If they were blustery at the gate when you approached do they calm down after awhile or get worse, faster, sharper? If they shy away at the gate, do they warm up and approach? They may be genuinely fearful or shut down from all the stimulus in this very chaotic environment.
- **Ask the staff:** They know the dogs very well. What they don't know is you. Their opinion is extremely valuable, but not the whole picture. Ask open ended questions like "What about this dog do you like" Dislike? Would he do well with young children? Other dogs? Cats?" **Important:** If they are trying to deter you away from a certain dog-listen to that! Remember, they know dogs. It's their job to try and place the right dog with you, not just herd em out the door. Along the same lines, if they are trying too hard to place a particular dog with you pay attention to that. They should be working from a place of honest objectivity, a line that can easily become blurred when there are so many to place.
- **Torn?** If you are conflicted, take a walk around the block or come back the next day. Try to avoid the "but someone else might get them while I'm gone" mentality. If someone else adopts him, great! Now go find the one that's for you!
- **Getting to know you:** If the shelter has a play yard, take advantage of that. Take your potential new companion there and observe. Typically they will need a couple of circles around the yard to get all their information about who has been there. Let them do that before you try to interact with them. See how they react as people walk by. How are they when they walk past the other dogs in the runs? How quickly do they orient to you? Are they overly invested in you? Play a little see how quickly they rile up and how long it takes them to calm down.
- **Arranged marriages:** Once you've decided that you like the dog, bring in your existing family-man and beast. See how your current dog and the new dog react to each other with putting any social pressure on either of them. Any big reactions are noteworthy. Is one dog overly fixated on the other? Or is one pretending not to see the other? That's stress. As much as you may want it to work, don't justify behavior-observe and then take a walk around the block with your existing dog. Come back and watch again. In general, it should be a lesser version. Best case scenario for success in multiple pet homes: an opposite sex puppy and a 5-year or older dog who are not too alike in temperament. Worse case scenario for success: littermates or dogs of the same sex/age and very similar temperament.



## You and your new dog!

### *Successful beginnings*

- **Take it slow!** Many times I meet a new dog in someone's home who was taken to the dog park on the way home-gotten overwhelmed and bitten a person or a dog. Give your new dog a few no pressure days to adjust to their new home. A quiet no disturb place to sleep and decompress.
- **Feeding** If possible ask for (or offer to purchase) a small amount of the food that they were being fed in the shelter. Mix mostly old food with a super premium food and some canned unsweetened pumpkin to help them adjust. Gradually (7-21 days) increase the new food as you reduce the old. Don't leave food bowls down. Feed and remove them.
- **Healthy dogs are happy dogs:** Taking them to the vet for a complete wellness check is critical. Particularly if you have young children, elderly or immune compromised people living with you. Zoonotic diseases (like ringworm) can be transmitted from dog to human.. Some vets offer free exams as part of the adoption process. Take them up on it!
- **Rescue is not a breed:** It is important to move on from any real or perceived horrible beginnings in your dog's life. Just because a dog is hand shy does not mean they were abused. Focus on the future, not the past. Show them how great their new life is going to be!
- **New life-New Identity:** Give them a different name if you like. It's very easy to change. Assign them a breed-even if you have to make one up. "Rescue" is not a breed. My off the street guy Willie was officially a Big Yellow Dog-not a finer breed in the world! Give them a birthday. Some people like to make the day they were adopted their birthday and in a way it is!
- **Hedge your bets:** Don't assume they are house trained even if they are older. They may have been before arriving in shelter, but even a few days in a dog run can undo some house training. Scheduled bathroom breaks can circumvent any potential problems. Some dogs may have just been spayed or neutered. That's major surgery with anesthesia-even a well house trained dog may have an accident while recovering.
- **Structure potential triggers:** The time to find out that your new pal has food issues is not when he's snarling in a corner over a steak bone. Avoiding high value items like raw bones, pig ears, rawhides, greenies etc. and keeping their food "neutral", gradually adding in those special treats (especially when adding a dog to an already doggy home) will get things off to a much better start.
- **New guy in town:** Again an area to take slowly. Preferring the older dog in the presence of the new guy for a few days will help reassure him of his status. The new guy may be so overwhelmed that he (most likely) will just want to sleep. Rushed introductions can be hard to undo. Dogs make first impressions too!
- **Making up for lost time:** Even if your new dog had been in the best of care, they have still been in a more or less sensory deprived environment. Making up for that with BIG love festivals can backfire with your dog crumbling as soon as you leave them alone. Canine Separation Anxiety (CSA) and its nasty little sibling-Canine Separation Anorexia are costly and stressful for both owner and dog. CSA is very common in shelter dogs. Did you know that 60% of dogs that present CSA are shelter dogs? Look at it from their point of view. You are the best thing that ever happened to them and now you are gone!! Help them to have a happy home life. A little time away from you each day when you are there, will go a long way in helping them when you are gone. And avoid the "hostage taking that CSA can create. Do both of you a big favor and don't overwhelm them with affection. Some dogs have a genetic predisposition for CSA; others learn it along the way with inadvertent mixed messages. If it starts up, get help immediately, it's easier to fix without too much time invested in it. Harder when they have had months to get good at it.
- **Avoid confrontation:** *Correction is not training.* If your dog makes a mistake, diffuse it and manage better next time. Dragging a leash for a few days is not a bad thing. Most likely you have



- no idea where this dog came from or its history. You have no idea what the word NO means to them. To some it's a verbal interrupter, other's it's the pre cursor to WWII. Be careful.
- **Training:** Sometimes even the best laid plans come undone with the great unknown. By making more informed choices when you select a dog, you greatly improve your chances of a long happy life together. However IF something happens, someone gets bitten, your older dog gets attacked or even after a couple of days you have a funny feeling in your stomach, call in a professional. Do not explain behavior away, thinking it only happened because there was a \_\_\_\_\_ <insert trigger here>.
  - **Calling in the big guns:** Let a professional who specializes in behavior problems specific to your situation evaluate your dog. Over the phone speculation is irresponsible. A responsible behavior consultant's job is to know (to the best of their abilities) which behaviors can be extinguished, which are improvable and which can only be realistically managed. Their methodology should be easily explainable and be within your realm of comfort. Hoping that things will go away will often cement that behavior making it much harder to resolve. If you need it, get help immediately! *Remember, training is the single most proactive thing you can do to ensure success with your new dog.*