

[Family]

Francis Tamayo checks out the residents at the PAWS shelter. Experts recommend taking your time when choosing a dog, and making sure it gets along with all members of the family, especially children and other pets.

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The perfect pooch

In the market for a dog? It pays to sniff around.

By William Hageman
TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

We know someone who recently made a spur-of-the-moment stop at an animal shelter and walked out a few minutes later with a new dog. A dog that wasn't housebroken. That nipped. That needed a crate (which had to be hastily purchased).

Our friend had the best of intentions — everyone wants animals out of shelters and in homes — but this was not the best way to adopt a dog.

The process takes planning and work. Here's a game plan for someone seeking to bring a dog home.

Think it out

The worst mistake that people make, says Karen Okura, manager of behavior and training at The Anti-Cruelty Society (anticruelty.org), is impulse adoption.

Don't pick an animal because it reminds you of your old dog, she says, or because you pity the animal, or because you lost your job and need to feel loved, or because the kids want one, or to save a marriage or relationship.

There are plenty of good reasons to adopt. "The No. 1 objective is to save a life. People don't realize the number of amazing dogs being euthanized," says Rochelle Michalek.

executive director of PAWS Chicago (pawschicago.org). "Dogs make great companions. They're great from a social perspective. Nothing breaks the ice like a dog when you're out meeting people."

Once you have a good reason to adopt, use your head.

"People should look at practical things," Okura says. "Does someone in the home have allergies? How prepared are you to do a minimal amount of grooming?"

Also ask yourself: Do you have the time to feed, train and exercise a new dog? Okura figures a puppy needs two years of intensive training; older dogs, a year. Can you afford the financial investment? Even routine medical care isn't cheap. Does the entire family approve, not just one or two members? Everyone will need to pitch in. Will a new dog get along with other pets in the home?

If you're looking at a puppy, know how big it's going to get. If it's from a shelter or one of those "free-to-good-home" ads, take your best guess and be prepared for an adult dog that's 10 to 30 pounds plus or minus that estimate.

Choosing a breed ... or not

Figure out what you want: big, small, male, female, energetic, laid-back, etc. Every factor should be considered.

Is there a purebred that appeals to you? Study up and learn more about that breed's dogs, from how big they get, to their temperament, to how much they shed. Talk to a rescue group that deals in that particular breed. It can tell you a breed's quirks — and it might even have an animal that would be a good fit.

Two sites listing breed rescue groups are akc.org/breeds/rescue.cfm and netpets.com/dogs/dogresc/doggrp.html.

If you have no particular breed in mind, consider a mutt. There are a lot more mixed-breed animals needing homes.

They also tend to be less prone to breed-specific health problems, and there's a school of thought that they're smarter than purebreds. They're also going to cost a lot less, in most cases.

"And their personalities might tend to be a little more diverse," Michalek says.

How to find the right dog

Okura does not recommend pet shops. "No breeder worth his reputation will sell puppies to pet stores, period," Okura says.

Backyard breeders? Maybe. They could be clueless owners or they could be running their own small-time version of a puppy mill.

"Sometimes," Okura says, "it might be an oops litter. She's only 7 months old and I didn't know she could have puppies." But if it's from the same address all the time, with oops litters, these are irresponsible people. Or they just do it to sell them."

Reputable professional breeders can be worth the expense and effort, but it's important to check them out beforehand.

"You can get a really nice dog from a professional breeder," Okura says. "If you're hellbent on a purebred dog, and you want the lineage to go back 10 generations, fine. But expect to be grilled, and possibly rejected."

"If you don't care about lineage (and still want a certain breed), go to a rescue, or an animal shelter."

Shelters are becoming prime sources for quality purebred dogs — well-kept, socialized, trained and family-ready — because of the economy. As well as those impulse adopters who had to have a purebred Dalmatian or Chihuahua or Lab and just as impulsively changed their minds and gave up the dog.

"Those dogs end up in our shelter," Michalek says.

A shelter dog can cost from \$75 to \$300, and very often are spayed or neutered and up-to-date on shots. A purebred dog from a breeder — sometimes the exact same type of dog — can cost two or three times as much.

Still totally unsure?

Michalek has a suggestion: Volunteer at a shelter. You'll get an up-close-and-personal look at all kinds of dogs, not a bad way to educate yourself — and do some good in the bargain.

Once you've zeroed in on a dog, have a family meeting with it. Everyone. Mom, Dad, the kids, your other pets.

"It's important for the kids to meet the dog," Okura says. "People tell us all the time, 'My kids are great with dogs.' But we don't know if this dog is great with kids."

Go for the perfect fit

Don't rush it. Okura says to do your homework and find the perfect fit. Not an OK fit, not a good fit. The perfect fit.

"One of the things I tell people is to be picky. Lots of people feel guilty in a shelter, looking at homeless animals. It's bigger than I wanted," or "Look at all this hair." We actively advise people who say, "He's just not right" to keep looking. Because somebody will take the dog you said no to."

PAWS has a way for new owners and dogs to smooth over minor rough spots. Its Foster to Adopt program is a two-week window for the adoption to take.

You go through the screening and the matching processes and you take your new dog home. But if things don't work out, you can bring the animal back and get the adoption fee refunded, no questions asked.

"(Foster-to-adopt) relieves the stress of, 'OK, I'm taking the dog home and I have to keep it,'" Michalek says.

Just remember, the bottom line isn't always the bottom line.

As humorist and animal activist Kinky Friedman puts it: "I've always said that money may buy you a fine dog, but only love can make it wag its tail."

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Ready for a new home



ZBIGNIEW BZDAK/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

The Anti-Cruelty Society and PAWS Chicago have a surplus of good dogs these days. Here's a field of five we met on a recent weekend visit:

Jesse James

A 3-year-old shepherd mix — there may be some chow mixed in there too — Jesse James was surrendered by an owner who didn't have time to take care of him. He rarely barks and tolerates training, according to the folks at Anti-Cruelty, and he's always on the alert. Apropos of nothing, his original name was Mr. Buttons.

Diamond

A high-energy shepherd mix, 8-month-old Diamond was "not wanted" by her owner, according to her Anti-Cruelty Society papers. She's tan and white and is a good candidate for obedience training. Very sweet and gentle personality.



Yashi

On the morning she had her photo taken, Yashi had gone on a seven-mile run with a PAWS volunteer. So there's no question about her stamina. A yellow/brown mixture of ... well, it's anyone's guess. Collie, Australian cattle dog and blue heeler all seem to be represented. She was relinquished to Chicago's Animal Care and Control by her former owner. Yashi is just over a year old and needs a home that can provide training and structure.



Ellie May

A 2-year-old American foxhound mix, she was a stray picked up by Animal Care and Control and rescued by PAWS. She is not a running companion — her urge to follow a scent is too strong — but she does love to go to the beach. Smart, high-energy and able to leap tall fences in a single bound.



Louis

Perhaps the most intriguing of the group, Louis is afraid of suitcases with wheels and tape measures. A little over a year old, he is some sort of hound. He was picked up as a stray in Chicago and now resides at PAWS, where staff reports he likes to snuggle and get belly rubs. But he won't talk about the suitcases.



— W.H.

For more information

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