

# Recycled Love

## choosing your dog from a shelter

Karin Larsen Bridge

Get S.M.A.R.T dogs  
Delta Behavioral Trainer



Suzy

There are many reasons why one might consider getting a dog from an animal shelter or rescue organisation. You may simply prefer the unique looks and personality of a mixed breed or appreciate that 'hybrid vigour' reduces the risk of genetic health problems. Perhaps you are looking for an adolescent or older dog rather than a puppy? For value for money there can be no better place to get a dog, the price generally including a health and heartworm check, de-sexing and life time identification. Probably the most common reason for choosing a dog from a shelter however is the desire to recycle a little love by giving a stray a home.

The problem of course lies in choosing the right dog for you and your family, from the sea of appealing faces that will confront you at a shelter. No matter how cute a dog is, do not let your heart rule your head! It is vitally important to look beyond appearances to the dog's temperament and personality. While there are many dogs at the shelter that will make wonderful family pets there are also dogs with behaviour or personality problems that may make your life a misery. The following information should help you to minimize that risk and ensure you and your adopted rescue have a long and happy life together.

### 1. Matching a 'doggy profile' to your family lifestyle.

What sort of dog do you want? I don't mean what is it going to LOOK like, I mean what sort of personality will fit in with you and your family?

Things to consider are:

- How active are you? Do you want a dog to go jogging with or a dog that will be happy to cuddle on the couch after a hard day at work? Sometimes an older big dog, will be satisfied with much less exercise than a terrier type small dog.
- Do you want the dog to live inside the home or out? A dog that is left outside will need to have a more independent nature and an all weather coat .
- Do you want the dog to accompany you as much as possible in the car and on family outings? A small dog that can jump in and out by itself and is easy for all family members to walk might suit you best.
- How much training do you want to do? Did you know that the most trainable breeds also tend to be the most high energy and destructive if not provided with a job to do? Working dogs NEED to be trained so if a lifelong commitment to training isn't your scene you might be better with a less 'trainable' type – who'd rather join you for a nap in the sun than a day at the obedience club.
- Do you have young children? Be extra careful to choose a dog with a resilient personality that won't object to being prodded, pulled or fallen on and that will happily accept little visitors to the home.

Who is going to be the main carer of the dog? Children are not able to be fully responsible for the welfare and training of a dog no matter what promises they made when begging you for one! Ultimately the responsibility will lie with the adults in the home – so make sure you get a dog that YOU like and will enjoy spending time with.

### 2. Choose a reputable animal shelter or rescue organization.

It will be easier for you to make an informed decision about your prospective dog if you go to a reputable animal welfare agency or rescue organization. Welfare agencies by definition have a vested interest in improving the welfare of dogs by securing successful adoptions. To this end, the best agencies will have :

- a health check and de-sexing program for all dogs.



- a behavioural trainer to assess and screen temperament
- detailed history taking whenever possible on surrendered dogs.
- a policy of retaining dogs based on suitability for adoption rather than a fixed time frame. (This means you don't have to worry that the dog you leave behind is on 'death row').
- follow up behaviour and training advice.
- Guidelines for suitability of prospective homes e.g. fences, place to sleep etc.

Some rescue organizations foster dogs out to temporary homes rather than run permanent kennels. This is generally far less stressful for the dog and gives the foster parent and prospective 'adoptee' a good chance to observe the dog in a domestic environment surrounded by people and other dogs.

### 3. Puppy, Adolescent or Adult?

Unlike most other sources, at a shelter you will have a choice of what age dog you would like to purchase. Puppies are always the most popular, being adorable bundles of fur and wagging tails. Many people consider a puppy is the best choice because it is a 'clean slate' that can be easily molded to fit into any family while the kids and the puppy can 'grow up together'. Although there is some truth in this belief, there are reasons why buying an older dog may sometimes be an even better choice:

- Temperament is better established in an older dog and easier to identify and assess – to a large extent what you see is what you get. A puppy's genetically determined personality may not yet be evident.
- The size, coat and shape of a mature dog is evident and established – no surprises!
- Genetic health problems such as hip dysplasia, progressive retinal atrophy and skin problems can be identified and thus avoided
- A young adult dog will still be amenable to training and establishing good habits without the extra workload associated with puppyhood such as frequent feeds, housetraining, destructive chewing and play biting.
- An older dog brought up with children would be less likely to chase and nip squealing young children than a puppy.
- An older, slower moving dog would be easier to handle and less likely to be tripped over by an elderly owner.
- In general, dogs with severe behavioural problems do not survive to 5 years of age or older – thus a dog of this age may well be a good natured dog that has been surrendered due to unfortunate circumstances such as divorce or moving homes. For a busy working family seeking companionship an older dog might be far less demanding of time and attention.
- Even at five years of age a typical terrier may well provide another ten years of happy companionship.

### 4. Choosing your rescue dog

First of all, take your time. Be prepared to make two or more visits to your chosen shelter. Better to go home empty handed than to take home a mistake. Many shelters now run web pages where you can browse for your special dog on-line. While this is a good first step, don't be too influenced by photos alone. Remember personality is more important than good looks – if the dog fits in with you and your lifestyle – you'll soon think he's the most beautiful dog in the world!

Talk to the shelter's behavioral trainer, staff member or foster parent to get some initial idea of the personality of the dog you are interested in. Is the dog a surrender or a stray? If it is a surrender, there should be a history available on the dog as to its previous experiences, behaviours and reason for surrender. Unfortunately, not all people are truthful when surrendering dogs and if they feel that a behaviour problem might cost the dog a home it may be left unmentioned. Nevertheless, if there is a history available take it into consideration.



## What to look for in a family pet dog

- Sociability to people – a willingness to approach in a friendly way new people – ideally men, women and children.
- Ability to accept handling, touching, petting, stroking and restraint – holding the collar, attaching a leash etc.
- Ability to 'settle' reasonably quickly after initial periods of excitement.
- Sociability to other dogs – able to play off lead with other dogs or quietly pass by on lead.

## What to avoid

- A dog that appears highly aroused around people and avoids making contact with them
- A dog that appears extremely fearful, cowering and avoiding interaction
- Darting eye contact, inability to focus on anything for any length of time and/or a hard staring eye.
- An overly mouthy adolescent or older dog constantly nipping and biting.
- A dog who seems overly stimulated by the fast movement of other dogs or objects.
- A dog who fights with other dogs or lunges aggressively toward them on lead.
- A dog with a history of prolonged social isolation e.g. in a backyard or kennel with little or no opportunity to interact with people or dogs.

### DON'T ASK FOR HEARTACHE

*Some behaviour 'problems' are easily fixed such as jumping up and pulling on a lead. However problem dogs do exist and most need a lot more than just a little tender loving care. Dogs that lunge at other dogs or display extreme fearfulness are just two examples. Good management of the problem is often the only solution. Although you may feel sorry for these dogs, please, don't set yourself up for years of heartache and diminished enjoyment of your canine companion by knowingly taking on a difficult case. There are plenty of good dogs in need of good homes that will be better ambassadors for shelter dogs everywhere perhaps encouraging one more person to 'recycle a little love'.*

## 5. Taking a Test Run

The following tests can help you decide whether a dog might make a good family pet. Each test is progressive, so if a dog fails one test it is best to quit there and consider another dog. If you are not confident to do the tests alone ask a shelter staff member to assist you or take a long experienced friend or professional. This is especially important if you are a first time dog owner. If at any time you feel uncomfortable or threatened by a dog, quit. It is better to acknowledge this feeling now than after you have had the dog at home for a week or two. There are of course no guarantees when choosing a dog from a breeder, pet shop or shelter however the following should help you to make an educated assessment.

### Test 1 – In the Kennels – desire to approach

- Walk past the row of kennels not making any attempt to interact with any of the dogs. Without stopping or staring, note which dogs move forward to investigate.
- Next, walk past, stopping and crouching to 'sweet talk' to any of the dogs you are interested in. Are they coming forward in a friendly fashion – long sweeps of the tail, perhaps a lick of the hand, soft eye contact, perhaps a submissive roll over?
- Put your hand out – does the dog lick it, follow it?
- Does he jump up and show any obvious signs of friendliness?

### Test 2 – Outside the Kennel - desire to approach

- Put the dog on a lead (or have a staff member do so) and take the dog out to a relatively



quiet area away from the other kennels and dogs to reduce some of the initial excitement.

- Hold the end of the leash keeping it as loose as possible while you stand still and completely ignore the dog. We want to see if the *dog chooses to approach you* without any prompting on your part. A people friendly dog should initiate contact within a couple of minutes.
- Note: a wagging tail alone does not necessarily indicate friendliness – a long, sweeping tail wag plus approach usually does .

### Test 3 – Reaction to human touch

If all is going well – start applying long, gentle strokes along the dog's back from neck to tail. Repeat several times then stop. Does the dog look to you for more or does he move away/avoid or freeze? Repeat the process two or three times. At all times watch and avoid signs of:

- Increased arousal/excitement
- Freezing
- Staring
- Mouthing
- Escape/avoidance
- Barking/lunging

Start to sweet talk to the dog. A good result would be the dog who chooses to stay with you and seems to be soothed rather than aroused by the physical petting. So far so good? Then it's time to move on....

### Test 4- Willingness to accept restraint and handling.

- Hold the leash a little shorter – does the dog struggle against you or show any signs of agitation or resentment?
- Gently but firmly, hold the collar for a minute or so. Does the dog accept being held for longer periods? If he resents it what is his first courses of action to pull away, roll over, or bite at your hand?
- If at any time you feel uncomfortable/threatened STOP.
- If at any time the dog seems to be excessively stressed/fearful STOP.

### Test 5 -Reaction around food.

- Toss the dog a treat, does he take it then look back at you inquisitively for more?
- Offer a treat from the hand. Does he take it gently?
- Throw a treat on the ground – will the dog sit quietly at your feet and chew it or moves away and seems to 'guard' it?
- Throw several pieces on the ground then pick up one or two pieces closest to you – does the dog show any concern ?
- If you notice any signs of aggression such as stiffening, a hard stare, or growling STOP immediately.
- Proceed only if you feel really comfortable with the dog to Test 6.

### Test 6 –How excited does the dog get by activity and play?

Throw a toy, is the dog:

- interested in it only while it is moving?
- willing to pick it up but won't give it back?
- willing to bring it back and give it to you?

Have a large tug rope and initiate a game. Is the dog:

- very interested – almost obsessed with the toy?
- mildly interested but happy to swap it for a treat?
- not at all interested?

Dogs who are easily excited by play and movement often make great working dogs but may not be the best choice for a family with young children. A laid back dog who would rather have



someone else retrieve his toys is less likely to interfere with children's games and toys or to become possessive of them. A dog who happily retrieves and SURRENDERS a toy is the best of both worlds.

## Test 7 – Reaction to other dogs.

Walk the dog past other dogs on lead and watch his reaction does he:

- ignore the other dogs?
- stares at them briefly but takes no other notice?
- drags you over toward the other dogs as if to play?
- barks/lunges toward them in an aggressive 'keep away' attitude?

You will get far more enjoyment from your dog if you can safely take him to areas where there may be other dogs not only to off-leash parks but any public places where there may be other people and their dogs.

## Test 8 – Reaction to other animals/prey

Walk the dog, if possible past cats, guinea pigs, fowl, horses, goats, or any other animal which may be available at the shelter. Many animals will show an interest however dogs with a high prey drive may seem 'obsessed', unable to turn their heads away. This could lead to problems with neighborhood cats or other pets. In some cases a high prey drive will be triggered by fast running small dogs, or crying, squealing children making such a dog a poor choice for a family pet.

Well that's it! Though no test can guarantee you the perfect family pet, an adult dog who has passed with flying colours is probably a safer bet than the 'blank slate' puppy.

Good dogs, adult and puppy, pure bred and cross bred are available at rescue centers if you just know how to look. How do I know? Because twelve happy years ago I got one - that's my Suzy in the photo.

*Reference: 'Sue Sternberg Presents a Guide to Choosing Your Next Dog from the Shelter'  
by Sue Sternberg (© Sue Sternberg 1999)*

