

Choosing the best shelter dog for your family

By Diane Pomerance

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) sponsors October as Adopt-a-Shelter-Dog Month to encourage Americans to turn their houses into homes by adopting a shelter dog. Each year, millions of dogs enter our nation's shelters, yet of the almost 59 million owned dogs in this country, fewer than 20 percent are shelter adoptees.

I am an activist who has owned more than 40 shelter dogs, thinks it's a shame more people don't adopt from a shelter, because the most faithful, healthy and loving dogs are waiting there for new homes.

People sometimes don't go to animal shelters to adopt a dog. They think, 'I don't want to inherit someone else's problem,' or they simply think all the dogs there are abused or hard to train, or that they won't be able to find the breed that they want. All of those notions couldn't be further from the truth.

In fact, up to nearly 60 percent of dogs in shelters are not strays, but pets whose families had to give them up because of a loss of income or a change in location. These are faithful, loving dogs who just need a home and some love.

The key is to know how to choose the right pet for your family. Here are tips to help families do just that:

- * Breed – Check online about the different breeds, their temperament, health and physical characteristics. Find out all you can about the specific animal from shelter workers and volunteers.

- * Lifestyle – Think about your lifestyle and personality in

terms of the kind of dog that would be more compatible with your home and your living situation.

* Activity level – Assess the activity level and exercise requirements of the dog you are considering. Are you able to walk your dog several times a day and play with him?

* Age – Figure out what age of the animal is best suited to you and your family. Which is more compatible with your age and lifestyle? Do you want an active puppy that needs attention and training, a middle-aged dog with established behaviors, or an older, less active dog?

* Time – Do you have enough time for a quality relationship with a dog? Like children, they require attention, companionship, patience and interaction. They also require socialization and obedience training.

* Budget – Research the costs of not only adopting a pet (adoption fee), but veterinary care, including spay/neuter, vaccinations, potential injuries or illness, regular checkups, toys, accessories, etc. Factor in costs of food, pet sitters or boarding while you're away. Keep in mind many pet shelters offer these services as part of the adoption fee, or at a discounted rate because many are not-for-profit organizations supported by private donations.

* Space – Do you have sufficient room for a dog to move, eat and sleep comfortably? Further, are you legally allowed to have a dog on the premises/in your community? If you rent, make sure you are legally allowed to have a pet.

* Shelter – Find out as much about the shelter from which you are adopting your pet as possible – what is its reputation? Is it a kill or no-kill shelter? What is the track record of the successful adoption of its dogs?

Adopting a shelter dog is a lifetime choice, as these pets will likely spend the rest of their lives with you, and it is

not something that should be taken lightly. That being said, it is a positive choice, and one that will bring joy and love into your home and provide your family a loyal, caring companion.

Diane Pomerance has a doctorate in communications from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and is widely regarded as a pet expert. She has written seven books about animals.