

Pet Adoption 101

Welcoming a furry addition to the home can be a fun and exciting event. But ensuring the animal and rest of the family live in healthy and happy harmony takes some preparation and work. Here are some tips from animal shelters about what to do before, during and after the adoption.

BEFORE YOU ADOPT...

Make sure everyone in the family wants a pet: Pet ownership can affect many aspects of family life, from deciding who gets to take the puppy out in the middle of the night to making sure everyone understands an animal is a long-term time, emotional, and financial investment. And because the pet will be part of the family for the long haul, it's important that everyone is on board about the kind, size and personality of the companion of choice. Shelter experts advise discussing the delegation of responsibilities and going through the process of picking out the pet as a group to avoid problems later on. "Understand all the responsibilities involved, and pick a time where you can all go pick a pet," said Madeline Bernstein, president of SPCA Los Angeles. "Many people have completely different ideas of what they want."

Do your research: Experts suggest researching breeds and characteristics to identify animals that best fit your lifestyle before you arrive at the shelter, where you could find yourself falling for a cute cat or dog that wouldn't be a great match. "Some people think Jack Russell Terriers are so cute, but they require a lot of work because they have a lot of energy," Stephanie Knight, communications specialist at SPCA of Texas, said. "So if you don't go for walks or outside much, you may want to consider getting something like a pug." It's also smart to research and budget for the costs you'll face when you bring the pet home, such as vaccinations for young animals, license fees and pet supplies.

Check the requirements: To avoid delays once you meet that perfect pet, shelters recommend looking into what paperwork is required for adoption. This can range from leases or other proof of residency to vet references. "If you haven't owned a pet, you can't have a vet reference, but if we see they have in the past we'll ask," Mantat Wong, director of Animal Haven in New York said. While home or apartment renters may be more aware of requirements needed for pets, it is important for homeowners to see if they have any pet restrictions as well. "If you're a renter you have to be aware of requirements but even as a

homeowner, insurance doesn't always cover larger dogs," said Marc Peralta, executive director of Best Friends Animal Society in Los Angeles.

Puppy-proof your home: Similar to preparing for a new baby, it is important to make sure a home is safe for a new arrival of a dog or cat. Animals can get into just as much trouble as young children, so working ahead to keep valuables out of reach of the furry friends can save time and money in the end. "Look around and try to figure out what a puppy or kitten can get into, like if you leave your shoes around," said Michelle Groeper, executive director at Tails Humane Society in DeKalb, Illinois. "Take the time to clean up. It's easier to do a little work ahead of time instead of buy new shoes, because you know your puppy will chew your favorite pair." It's also recommended that prospective owners purchase as many essential supplies as you can before adopting, such as getting a leash, toys, a bed, or a crate. Getting set up ahead of time can help smooth the transition from the shelter to the home.

Check out the shelter before stepping foot inside: Most shelters have websites that many experts recommend surfing. Beyond looking up requirements needed for adoption, people can see all the animals the shelter currently has to get a better idea of what they're in for. "Look for any animal they have online that may catch your eye," Groeper said. "It can be overwhelming if you walk in and see all these furry animals."

WHILE YOU'RE AT THE SHELTER:

Bring your dog if you already have one at home: Many shelters require families to bring any dogs they already have at home for a meet-and-greet with the potential new pet, a policy meant to ensure chemistry between the two animals won't be an issue. "Most places require you to bring your dog," Bernstein said. "They get an idea whether they're coping with each other. Occasionally the situation shows it's a bad idea (to bring another dog home) most of the time it works out and helps with an introduction."

Check the chemistry with humans, too: While some may have their heart set on a certain breed or look of dog or cat, it's important to keep an open mind when looking for a forever friend. "There's going to be a lot of dogs, so just go where the chemistry takes you," Bernstein said. "People have a preconceived idea of what they want and they almost never leave with that."

Ask questions about the animal: Don't be afraid to ask questions about anything regarding the animal, such as their health history or the situation that put them in a shelter. The more information the shelter can give, the better prepared a family will be when questions arise long after they have left the shelter. "You want to ideally know as much as the shelter knows," Bernstein said. "You want to know the medical conditions, if they've been spayed or neutered, any behavior issues. Anything they can tell you about the animal is useful."

Bring that paperwork you prepared: Meeting lease requirements for adopting an animal can delay a pet's release for a day or more if the paperwork isn't ready in advance. Many times, the lease is used as confirmation of what is and is not allowed on the property. Without that proof, a family would not be able to bring home their chosen pet the day they picked it out. "Anyone who rents, it saves us a lot of trouble because then we'll have to call the landlord or building and sometimes they don't answer," Wong said. "It's usually the roadblock that prevents a same day adoption."

ONCE YOU'RE HOME...

Go to a training class: Puppies and kittens aren't always easy to train, especially when their cuteness gets in the way of efforts to establish boundaries and rules. Taking an obedience class is a simple way to teach an animal the proper way to behave, while also creating an important bond between the animal and its family. "The more you can share a language with your dog, the less behavioral issues there are later on," Bernstein said. "Making sure the pet is healthy, happy, and taking a training class as a whole family makes it a more enriching experience, and everyone will be happier in the end."

Don't sweat it if your new pet is shy: Dogs, and especially cats, tend to want to hide when they first get in a new environment. Shelters recommend leaving shy animals alone to get used to their new home on their own terms, which means not following the pet around as they explore. Also, even if they were housebroken in the shelter, animals can revert back to old behavior when scared. "If you see a dog or cat acting funny, it's most likely because of their new environment," Knight said. "Especially with cats, it's in their nature. ... It's important to remember they do grow out of it."

Keep asking questions: Many shelters encourage families to call when they need anything -- these are the places that know a lot more about the animal than their new family. It's also good to keep up-to-date with your vet. They can answer health-related

questions, as well as give the recommended yearly vaccinations. “We have a behavior department that will answer any questions the adopters have,” Knight said. “Also follow up with your vet, make sure you have your vaccinations every year.”

Track your animal: Animals can stray away from home and get lost, and to make sure it's easier to find your beloved pet, experts recommend registering your animal, or putting a microchip in them. This way if someone finds them and returns them to a shelter, an employee can scan for the pet's unique ID number and contact the pet recovery service, which will connect them with the owner.

Accept if it's not a good fit: While some families want an animal and think a breed or specific pet is perfect for them, this isn't always the case. If the animal and family would be happier separated, it's important to talk to the shelter and look into returning the pet. “If it's not a good fit, we want the animal back,” Peralta said. “Obviously we don't want to see the animals come back, but in the ‘people world’ sometimes it doesn't always work out with your high school sweetheart. The same thing can happen in the animal world.”

Send pictures: An easy way to say thanks to a shelter for all their hard work: send photos of the animal in its happy new home. Many workers don't get to say goodbye to animals before they get adopted, so keeping up-to-date with them is affirmation that they went with the right family. “A lot of adopters really understand how much we put in to the animals we care and get attached and want us to be reassured they went to a good home,” Wong said. “This is very thankless job, and it's such a nice morale boost to hear success stories.”