

How to Pick a Winner

Evaluating shelter dogs for a safe, friendly, and adaptable temperament

Ask trainer Sue Sternberg where you should get a dog and, without hesitation, she'll tell you to go to an animal shelter. She should know – as a nationally recognized dog trainer and owner of Rondout Valley Kennels, a boarding kennel, training and behavior center, and private shelter in Accord, New York, she regularly works with shelters across the country, and counsels families who have adopted from them.

In addition, Sternberg has produced several booklets and videotapes about issues specific to shelter dogs and shelter dog adoption. The booklets include *Temperament Testing for Dogs in Shelters* and *A Guide to Choosing your Next Dog from the Shelter*; the videos include *The Controversial Pit Bull* about temperament testing Pit Bulls in shelters, and *Training Your Shelter Dog*. She also is a frequent and popular speaker at all sorts of dog-related venues.

Setting aside all of the arguments for buying a puppy from a breeder, Sternberg emphatically pronounces that you should adopt a dog from a shelter because, as she says, “it’s the right thing to do. Because there are great dogs in animal shelters, and because dogs in shelters need homes. There is no need to get a puppy from a breeder in order to raise it right – getting your dog at an early age is no guarantee of how he will turn out. Plus, you can find all the great qualities you could ever want in a shelter mixed-breed dog or puppy, or in one of the thousands of purebreds waiting in shelters on any given day.”

Of course, there are plenty of canine train wrecks desperately seeking homes in animal shelters as well – dogs who will cause heartache and trauma for the average dog owner. Sternberg offers tips to help prospective adopters find the diamonds in the rough world of animal sheltering.

Before you visit a shelter

There are a number of steps you need to take before you even set foot inside the shelter door. Doing some pre-visit homework can greatly increase your odds of finding the perfect pup. Here are Sternberg’s suggestions:

- Visit Petfinder on-line, at www.petfinder.org. This web site lists shelters across the country, and can pinpoint the ones in your area starting with those closest to you. You can also search for specific breeds or breed mixes.
Caution: If all dogs on a particular shelter’s website are described the same way (sweet, friendly, loving) then the shelter probably doesn’t know the personalities of their dogs very well, or chooses not to be forthcoming with the information. This would be a good shelter to avoid.
Petfinder is not a complete list of all shelters, so you also need to check your local phone book for others in your area. You should be willing to travel a good distance, as much as three hours or more, to find the right dog at the right shelter.
- Contact the shelters on your list and ask about their return policy. A good shelter will always accept any dog as a return that they have adopted out at any time in his life, for whatever reason the owner may be unable to keep him. You should not expect a refund if you must return your dog, but shelters that refuse to take a dog back after 30 days (or whatever time limit) are not accepting full responsibility for the lives that pass through their hands.
- Ask the shelters about their adoption procedures. You will want to be able to visit with your prospective new family member outside of the kennel. If that is not allowed by a shelter, cross that one off your list.

- Ask the shelters about their criteria for making dogs available for adoption. Good shelters do temperament testing, and do not make dogs available who have a prior history of biting. Some dogs are not appropriate for our human society. A shelter who places all dogs up for adoption and never euthanizes is doing a disservice to potential adopters. Don't go to such a shelter.
- Sit in on a dog training class (or several). Find a trainer you like, who is kind to dogs and motivates them with treats, toys, and praise. (A selection of trainers from across the country is available from the APDT Trainer Locator at www.apdt.com.) Ask the instructor for good shelter referrals. If there are students in the class with shelter dogs, ask them which shelter they adopted from and what their experiences were. Avoid shelters where others have had negative experiences.
- Talk to the trainer you like about accompanying you to the shelter to select a dog. You should expect to pay a fee for this service, so you may want to arrange to have her visit with you once you find one or more possible adoption candidates.
- When you do start visiting shelters, look beyond a slick exterior. A good shelter is made up by people who care, and the good dogs in their kennels. There are lots of old, rundown, dark and damp shelters that have great dogs and are staffed by wonderful people, and there are others that are just as wretched as they look. There are also bright, pretty, high-tech modern shelters that treat people and animals well, and still others that are all window-dressing, forgetting to treat their human and canine clients with compassion.
- Avoid rigid preconceptions about what kind (age, breed, sex, size, color, coat length) of dog you want. Be prepared to enter the shelter with an open mind. Size, for example, is not a good indicator of energy level or adaptability to a small house – many large dogs are better suited to apartment life than are the typically high-energy but small Jack Russell Terriers.

The shelter visit

Although it's best to avoid preconceptions about what model of dog you are looking for, Sternberg advises that it is very important to know what to look for behaviorally. "A high level of sociability will contribute more to a dog's success in a home than any other trait," Sternberg says. "Overall, be looking for a dog that really likes people and wants to be with them, who is affectionate, congenial, and bonds easily and strongly. These are the dogs who are most fun, and the least worry to live with."

Stand firm on this behavior criteria as you progress through Sternberg's 12-step program for adoption success:

1. **As you enter the shelter, get a reading on the attitude of staff and volunteers.** Are you greeted warmly and treated well? If you are asked to fill out a questionnaire, are the interviewers genuinely interested in who you are and helping you find the right dog, or are you grilled like a criminal? Any concerns about your answers should be used to help educate, not condemn you. If you feel like you are getting the thumbscrews and third-degree, leave. It would be almost impossible to concentrate on your task in an environment like this.
2. **When you enter the kennels, make a quick pass through without stopping to schmooze the dogs.** Pen and paper in hand, make note of any dogs that stand out for you. Ideally, you might find four or five who do.
3. **On your second pass-through, stop and visit with each of the dogs you noted.** Put your hand up to the kennel wire or bars. The dog should readily come up to visit you and sniff your hand. Remember, these dogs are socially deprived, and should be seeking your attention. When a candidate sniffs your hand, tell him he's a good dog, and move your hand back and forth, slowly, several times, about five inches each way. A social dog will follow your hand. Remember, you want a social dog – a well-socialized, outgoing, and friendly dog is the least liable to be aggressive. If the dog jumps at your faces, barks at

- you, lunges or, alternatively clings to or retreats to the back of the kennel, cross him off your list and move on to the next dog.
4. **When you have identified the dogs on your list who are very social, take them out of their kennels one at a time, to a quiet room if possible.** (Not all shelters can provide this luxury. Do the best you can – find a relatively quiet corner somewhere.) Stand with the dog for five minutes, and totally ignore him. The dog should look at you in a warm way, and try to worm his way into your affections – leaning on you, nudging, licking, trying to cuddle. Jumping up is okay if it is done as attention-seeking, not in an attempt to bowl you off your feet as he bounces away from you. If an employee is with you and the dog is seeking attention from the employee, that’s okay – it just means the dog has already formed a bond with that person. If in five minutes the dog shows little or no interest in you or in other humans who are with you, put him back. He is not a good candidate.
 5. **If he is very social, pet him slowly and gently down his back.** He should stand still and enjoy this, or lean into you, seeking more contact. If he shakes you off after you’ve touched him (“Yuck, people cooties!”) or moves or lunges away from your touch, he’s telling you he doesn’t like being petted, or being around you. This dog is at risk for being aggressive anytime people touch him in a way that offends him. Put him back.
 6. **If he passes the petting test, ask a shelter staff member if you can feed him a meal** – a small bowl of kibble, or a handful of biscuits that you brought with you. You want to test him for resource guarding – another behavior that puts him at high risk for biting. Put a bowl of food or pile of treats on the floor, enough that it will take him about 45 seconds to finish it. Now (BE CAREFUL!) talk to him, then pet him gently on the back. (Do not try to take the food away!) You want him to wag his tail, wag his tail harder, or even stop and look at you as if to say, “Hi! I’m eating right now, I’ll be back with you shortly.” He may even stop eating and prefer to be with you. However, if he stiffens, blocks you with his body, glares at you, lowers his head into the dish, growls, or tries to move the food away from you, he is a resource guarder, and not a good adoption choice.
 7. **If he passes the first food test, up the ante.** Ask the shelter staff if you can give him a chew hoof, pig ear, rawhide, or some other very valuable object. Again, you want to see if he is cooperative or competitive with this resource. Slowly move toward him and look for any of the guarding signs described in the previous step. If you see them, stop the test. If not, slowly reach for the object from a distance of at least two feet, then jerk your hand back. Repeat this step three times. You are looking for a dog who is relaxed about your approach. If you see any signs of guarding, don’t adopt. Have the staff person retrieve the valuable object and put the dog away.
 8. **If the dog is still with you, your next step is to pet him all over.** He should actively enjoy being petted, perhaps wag his tail, even lick you. He should not mouth you, even gently. If he does, put him away. Mouthiness, even done gently, is a sign of resistance, and may escalate to a bite if someone, such as a child, ignores the sign and keeps on petting or touching.
 9. **Now take out a toy (that you brought with you for this purpose, or one that the shelter provides, if they prefer) and see if he will play some sort of game with you: fetch, tug-o-war, or chase.** Play the game for three to four minutes – enough to get him excited and aroused. Then abruptly stop the play, and put the toy up, preferably on a shelf where he can see it. Take note of how long it takes him to disengage from playing and return to you to settle and socialize, perhaps sit or lie down next to you. Ideally, he will do this within two minutes. If he is still aroused after five minutes, put him away. This is the kind of energy level that the average dog household is not equipped to deal with. (If, on the other hand, you are looking for the next World Frisbee or Agility Champion, he might be a candidate.)
 10. **Take the dog for a walk on leash, outside if possible.** Don’t worry if he pulls, or is very distracted – these are behaviors that are normal for shelter dogs, and can be retrained. Do watch for aggressive behavior toward other dogs or people while he is on leash. If you see any, put him away and cross him off your list.

11. **If this dog is still on your list when your walk is done, have a staff person put him back in his kennel, then watch him as other strangers pass by**, especially children, big men, and anyone who moves or dresses oddly. Avoid a dog who barks or lunges at anyone who walks by – this is a sign of inadequate socialization. If your dog will be around children, look for a dog who wants to greet passing children first. A dog who will live with children must worship little humans, not just tolerate them.
12. **If you still have one or more candidates in the running, ask the shelter staff if you can put them on temporary hold** while you make arrangements to return with your kids and spouse (if you have them) and trainer. You may also want to bring your current dog, if you have one, so your trainer can help with the first introduction. Shelter staff may tell you that they can't put a dog on hold, because if someone else wants to adopt in the meantime and you don't return for some reason, he might miss out on his best chance for a home. This is reasonable. However, they should be willing to note that you are interested on the dog's paperwork, and give you a reasonable amount of time to return, so the dog isn't selected for euthanasia before you can get back with your crew in tow. When you do return, your trainer will be able to help you make an educated final decision about which of the dogs on your short list is the best choice for a long relationship with your family.

For contact information for Sue Sternberg and her booklets and videotapes, see her [expert page](#) on Petfinder.

Pat Miller is a freelance author and a professional dog trainer in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers. For information about her training classes, contact Pat at Peaceable Paws Dog & Puppy Training, phone (423) 326-0444.

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