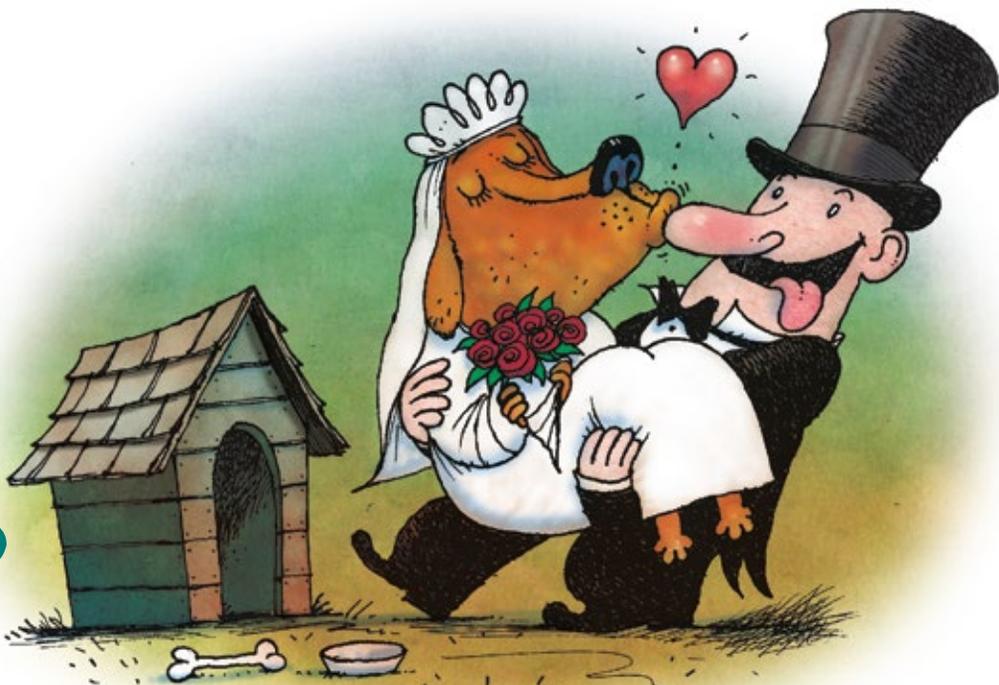


10 tips for lifelong BLISS with a shelter dog

BY JAN A. IGOE | ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVID CLARK



1. If you went to Woodstock, skip the puppies

Ignore this advice if you've got a family of young kids to grow alongside a young pup for the next 10 to 15 years. You'll be fine. But if you are already collecting Social Security, cover your eyes and keep walking past the puppies. It may be difficult to picture the tiny, fur-covered angel asleep in your palm as an 80-pound wrecking ball, but it happens fast.

Besides, puppies are a lot of work. They usually arrive with worms, crying

Every year, millions of Americans are diagnosed with canophilia, which is highly contagious and has no cure. Symptoms range from petting every dog in sight to frequent stops at the animal shelter and the irresistible urge to adopt another dog, no matter how many you've already welcomed to your pack. The condition often gets worse over time.

By definition, canophilia means the love of dogs, and canine enthusiasts adopt more than 3 million shelter dogs every year, which is 25% of the ones looking for homes. Mutts and purebreds alike are fighting the odds from the moment they set paw inside. Adoptions favor the small, young, pretty, non-shedders, which are rare. Most pets that walk into a shelter never walk out.

Adoption is a long-term commitment, like a successful marriage. You're choosing a dog to love and cherish, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health until death do you part. Be sure you're compatible before you sign on the dotted line.



for comfort and ready to pee on your oriental rug. An older dog is more likely to be cuddle-ready and content to walk around the block at your pace. Their personalities have developed, so you know what you're getting. (Don't worry about the puppies. They always find homes.)

2. Evaluate your lifestyle (and dog-style)

We're all friends here, so let's be truthful. Do you prefer three hours of Netflix to running a marathon? How many hours a day will you entertain your pup? On a scale of one to 10, how patient are you?

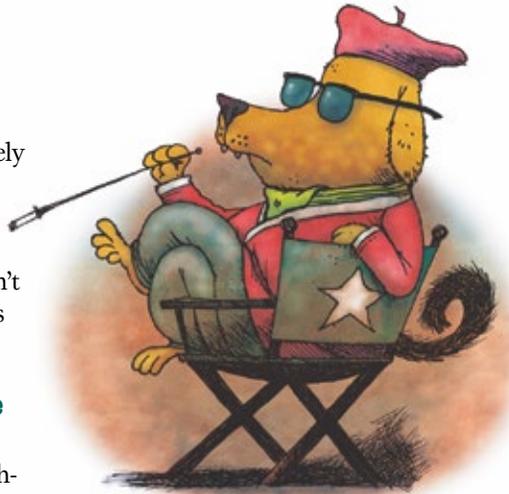
There are myriad reasons why dogs end up in shelters, but one of the biggest is irreconcilable differences. A young Aussie has the stamina of an Olympic decathlete. Likewise border collies, which go nuts without a job. And those sleek Belgian Malinois that are always making news? They'd rather be hunting terrorists than watching you crochet.

If you like a quiet home, avoid musically inclined breeds. Huskies love to sing, beagles like to howl, and Chihuahuas never tire of yap-yap-yapping. According to iheartdogs.com, those noisy little dogs are the third most commonly dumped breed in shelters. Beagles are No. 6. Do some breed research before you choose.

3. Forget the last dog movie you loved

No, Cruella, you really don't want 101 Dalmatians running around the house, no matter how adorable they look on screen.

Cocker spaniels, St. Bernards, collies, sheepdogs, Labrador retrievers and mastiffs have taken turns in the spotlight and enjoyed commensurate popularity, but that doesn't guarantee you'll be delighted to have them on the other end of your leash. Some are high-maintenance breeds that slobber, shed and require nonstop grooming. And believe me, tripping over a mastiff who takes up half your kitchen gets old fast. If social media doesn't make



you want to dress like Kim Kardashian, don't let Hollywood pick your pooch. The director can yell, "Cut" when things go sideways. You can't.

4. Never underestimate canine power: physical and emotional

When a petite friend of mine adopted Barley, the Lab puppy quickly outgrew his pixie-size handler. Barley meant no harm when he exploded out the front door and dragged her down the front steps, shattering her collar bone. She forgave Barley, but Mr. Pixie was ready to "dump that mutt in the shelter" or file for divorce. A few tantrums later, they reached a truce and called in an expert, who taught the dog to wait at an open door until given permission to exit. Barley mastered obedience just in time to save their marriage.

5. Don't surprise significant others or count on kids

Is your family on board with your decision to adopt? You're not surprising your future ex-husband, right? He may fall madly in love with a dog he didn't want, but don't count on it. As the divorced mom of many rescues, you can trust me on this.

Smiling children will pledge to walk, feed and brush the dog "so you won't have to do a thing, Mom." And they absolutely mean it for three days. Caring for a dog does teach kids responsibility, but you'll probably be elected Pooper Scooper-in-Chief. Bring everybody to

visit the shelter and find a pup everyone likes who likes everyone of you. Take your time. If your child is in kindergarten, remember that the dog you pick will probably be there when she leaves for college.

6. Look beyond the "rap sheet"

When I first met Gizmo at the local Humane Society, he was sitting in a crate at the counter. The scruffy terrier-mix had short legs, a bushy tail that curled over his back, and ears that rotated like radar dishes. You could tell the little guy had attitude to spare.



"You don't want him," the shelter assistant assured me. "He ran away from his original owner and was just returned by his second adopter."

Any time a dog is returned to the shelter, it's a black mark against him. Poor Gizmo never bit, snapped or growled at anyone, but he had a rap sheet and no way to plead innocence. Someone claimed he beheaded a Barbie doll.

Despite a history of toy aggression, Gizmo became my best friend for the next 13 years. Memories of his antics still brighten my darkest day.



7. Give peace a chance

When you introduce a new dog to the one (or more) at home, don't expect instant harmony. That may take some time. The pets section of webmd.com recommends introducing everyone in a neutral environment. Try a leisurely walk with both dogs on loose leashes. Watch for signs of stress, such as tucked tails and flattened ears, and be prepared to intervene.

Some trainers recommend crating a new dog and letting everyone breathe the same air for a while. Keeping all dogs leashed in the house for a week also gives them time to realize the others don't pose a threat.

8. Don't discount the jumpers

Of course, you weren't hoping to adopt a kangaroo, but shelter dogs are so deliriously happy to escape their enclosures, they can't always contain it. A dog that jumps up to greet you probably hasn't had much training, which is easily fixed. In fact, lack of training is the reason some dogs, especially big ones, end up in shelters.

Behavior that was cute in a puppy might not be so cute two years later. Dogs need to know what's expected of them. To avoid problems, start training early. Establish boundaries and be consistent. If bad habits aren't corrected, they always escalate.

9. Do your math

Getting a healthy, neutered or spayed dog for under \$100 is a great deal, but no one gets off that easy. The first year of dog ownership will set you back almost \$1,300, according to moneyunder30.com. That doesn't include medical emergencies. It doesn't take many tests or X-rays to run up a vet bill. Anything from accidental poisoning to a sock-swallowing bender that requires surgery can run into thousands of dollars.

And there's the cost of training. Most of us need help getting our dogs to behave. It's not just teaching Fido what to do, it's teaching him what not to do, like eating 23 socks, digging up the yard, counter surfing or playfully tackling your toddler. You might start with a group class for the basics, like sit, stay, down, etc. There are also private trainers who will come to your home, or boot camps where your pup goes for a few weeks for training without distractions.

For example, Off-Leash K9 Training in Myrtle Beach charges \$600 for a Basic Obedience Package that includes a training collar, leash and four lessons. Private trainers may charge considerably more, especially if they're dealing with aggression.

Another expense to consider is doggie daycare, which spares your best friend from spending the day in a crate while Mom and Dad work. It's a relief to come home to an exhausted dog that's ready

to relax with you. Camp Bow Wow, a national franchise, charges \$30 per day. If you board overnight, petrx.com says \$25 to \$45 is the average tab. The fancier the facility, the more they charge.

10. Know when to choose a stuffed animal

Dogs land in shelters through no fault of their own. Economic hardship is the major reason people surrender their pets, but it's not the only factor. Couples move where dogs aren't allowed. They get divorced, or need to care for a sick parent or expect a new baby and fear the dog's reaction. Life throws some unexpected curveballs, but some are avoidable. If you work 80 hours a week or your life is in turmoil, it may not be the best time to make a lifetime commitment to a furry friend.

One last thought: Dogs are sentient beings and shelter life is very hard on them. They'll need time to decompress, so remember the 3-3-3 Rule when you adopt.

For the first three days, your dog may be overwhelmed and stressed by a new home and family. Adrenaline kicks in and their behavior is less predictable. Let the pooch settle in before training starts. By the third week, Fido will get the hang of things. He'll trust you and his environment. His behavior may change and his personality will emerge as his comfort level increases.

At the three-month mark, your pup knows he's loved and cherished. Now his true colors start to shine. ☺



JAN A. IGOE is actively involved with rescuing shelter dogs for service work. She loves fostering and socializing canines for permanent homes or service training. Two of her personal pups are certified therapy dogs.