

Training a Shelter Dog

Expert advice on teaching a rescue dog your rules.

September Morn

Some folks prefer purebreds, others delight in mixed breeds, but dogs of all shapes, and sizes, breeds and mixes can be adopted from animal shelters. And, with a little help from their friends, including some positive training and maybe a bit of problem-solving, most shelter-adopted dogs can become wonderfully loyal, loving companions.

Shelter Dog — Assume Damage?

Does adopting a dog from a shelter automatically mean you'll be dealing with major behavioral issues? No, not necessarily. In fact, many dogs land in shelters for reasons quite unrelated to their behavior. Sue Sternberg, president of Rondout Valley Animals for Adoption, a privately run shelter in rural Accord, N.Y., reports that her shelter receives more dogs because of overpopulation and owners ignorance and financial problems than behavioral problems. Sternberg says of the dogs at her rural shelter, "Most of these dogs and pups have no behavioral or temperament issues whatsoever." She notes that wonderful dogs can be found at shelters, particularly shelters with temperament evaluation and training programs.

In urban areas, in contrast, owner-related causes for relinquishment — divorce, allergies, moving, lack of time — are common as well, but behavioral issues are also fairly common. This may be a result of denser populations and stricter laws, which make canine misbehavior a bit more noticeable.

Becky Schultz, coordinator of animal training at the Animal Humane Society in Minneapolis, Minn., the fourth largest shelter in the United States, sees many dogs in need of education and socialization. Schultz says, "We receive about 20,000 animals per year, so it's a busy place. Believe it or not, the main behavioral reason for surrender of dogs is [lack of] housetraining. We also see a number of problems relating to lack of basic training, like general unruliness, dogs not coming when called and destructiveness in under-stimulated dogs. Although these dogs surely need training, most have normal temperaments and are perfectly capable of learning better manners."

Attitudes Can Help or Hinder

Sternberg points out that just because a dog is adopted, rescued or found doesn't automatically mean it's a problem dog. She says, "I think the most common problems with any adopted dogs come more from the perspective of new owners believing adopted dogs are somehow more damaged, abused or challenging than the dog purchased from a breeder as a pup."

Sternberg notes that some people delay the start of training for their shelter-adopted dogs, thinking that the dogs will first need time to heal emotional scars. This is a common mistake, and it doesn't help a bit. "It's really not good for your budding relationship to think of your adopted dog as damaged goods. Make sure you don't feel sorry for your new dog or dwell on its possible past," says Sternberg. The dog doesn't dwell on its past, only the present. We might wisely take a lesson from our dogs on this point.