

Welcome Home

How to make a newly adopted senior dog part of your family.

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Eight-year-old chocolate Labrador Retriever Ellie was left at a Sparta, Wisc., shelter by a family that no longer wanted her. At her age, she was not a likely candidate for adoption. Thanks to an Internet ad, however, Ellie found her way to a new home with Stephanie Harlan in Mundelein, Ill. Harlan describes Ellie as the love of my life. We never thought having an older dog could be so wonderful, Harlan says. From the start, she walked without a leash and listened 100 percent to commands. She even won Mundelein's pet costume contest!

Besides being obedient and cute enough to win a contest, what makes an older dog so wonderful? Ann Cadman, an administrative assistant at Animal Friends, a shelter in Pittsburgh, says, Older dogs adjust quickly, have personality-plus, and are resilient. Cadman's recently adopted senior dog, 8-year-old Beethoven, a Siberian Husky mix, illustrates that resilience. He lost his hearing following an ear infection, but, like his deaf namesake, he continues to spread joy in his case, through pet-assisted therapy. Cadman notes other attributes that make seniors good adoption choices: Most are housetrained, past the chewing stage, and often calmer than young dogs.

Cut-off Point? If you're considering adopting a senior dog, you may wonder, Is a dog ever too old to adjust to a new home? Jude Fine, founder and director of the Senior Canine Rescue Society in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, asserts, Ninety-nine percent of older dogs adjust if treated with patience and kindness.

Ample anecdotal evidence bolsters such confidence. Benny Archuleta of Jacksonville, Fla., founder of the Dachshund Rescue Web Page, adopted a 14-year-old Dachshund, Punky, leading him to conclude, Maturity need never be a negative factor in an adoption decision. Deborah Workman, founder and director of the Sanctuary for Senior Dogs in Cleveland, has a new home lined up for a 17-year-old male Chihuahua. He beats by a year the Sanctuary's former record-holder, a 16-year-old female Husky. In northern California, a 16-year-old Shepherd mix named Sugar was left homeless after his owner's death. Laura London of Reno, Nev., found him on the Web site for the San Francisco-based Senior Dogs Project. She adopted him and reports, Sugar loves the backyard and going for walkies.