

Adopting Cats from an Animal Shelter

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Animal shelters can be a good source of many different types of fine quality pets. Most shelters accept cats and dogs, and some also accept birds, small mammals, and even horses.

Types of shelters

Not all shelters are alike. Some shelters are actually part of your local government, supported by your tax dollars. Animal Control Officers or the police may be responsible for bringing abandoned or free-roaming animals to the shelter (or 'pound'). Some shelters are independent, and rely on charitable contributions. Some may be associated with national groups such as the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals who can provide them with guidelines on operating the shelter, and educational materials for new pet owners and the community. Finally, some may be totally independent non-profit organizations. In our area, for example, we have an organization called 'Critter Rescue.' They help to provide homes for pets whose owners may not be able to take care of them, either on a temporary or permanent basis.



Shelters may differ in the services they provide, which is often associated with their operating budgets. Many tax-supported shelters have lower budgets than those who operate through contributions. Regardless of budget, in every shelter there are staff who are dedicated to their work and the animals in their care.

Reasons animals are in shelters

Many animals in shelters are pets whose owners can no longer care for them for a variety of reasons. This may be because their owners:

- Are moving and cannot take their pet with them
- Have health problems
- Have become incapacitated or died
- Do not have time for the pet because of changes in their lifestyle, e.g.; new baby, ill family member
- Have other pets who do not get along with this one
- Realize they should never have gotten a pet

Other animals are brought to shelters because they are homeless or come from abusive situations.

Animal evaluation by the shelter

What is included in the evaluation of an animal surrendered to a shelter depends on the shelter. Some shelters provide an in-depth evaluation which includes obtaining a good history of the animal's health and behavior in his prior home, a veterinary exam, screening for various diseases such as heartworm or [feline leukemia virus](#), and an assessment of the animal's temperament and behavior in the shelter. Other shelters, often because of budget constraints, provide only a minimal evaluation. Ask the people at the shelter how they evaluate the animals that come to them. If possible, get a written copy of the evaluation and any veterinary care to keep as part of the animal's medical record.

Before you go to a shelter

Having a pet is a big commitment. This animal will be spending years of her life with you. So, before you go to a shelter, it is important to ask yourself several questions:

- Am I emotionally, financially, and personally ready to take the responsibility of having a new pet?
- Do I understand the nutritional, housing, and health requirements of this pet?
- Have I acquired the necessary items needed to take care of this pet, and have I 'pet-proofed' my house?
- Do I know what type of pet I want, e.g.; species, breed, or size, temperament, gender, age, energy level? Write down the characteristics you are looking for. We have heard many stories of people who went to a shelter with one type of pet in mind, and 'fell in love' with an entirely different type of animal, and adopted him. Sometimes this worked out fine; other times, the owner regretted the on-the-spur-of-the-moment decision. Be sure to think carefully about what type of pet you are looking for.
- Are all of the family members in agreement about getting a new pet?

- Have guidelines been set for the feeding, grooming, discipline and training, and cleaning up after the pet?

The adoption process

To adopt an animal from a shelter, there are usually several steps, including:

- Filling out an application
- Choosing your new pet
- Experiencing a waiting period (usually 24 hours)
- Signing a contract and paying a fee
- Undergoing a trial period

Application: When adopting a pet from a shelter, you will be asked to fill out an application form which may ask for:

- Proof of age and permanent residence
- Pet ownership history including veterinarian records,
- Proof of vaccination and licensing of other pets
- You may also need to provide a photo id

Choosing a pet: It may be overwhelming to see the number of animals you have to choose from. Take your list of desired characteristics with you to remind you of any limitations you have on your choice of animal. Remember size, temperament, sex, age, and coat.

The behavior of a caged animal is not always the same as the behavior the animal would have in a home environment. Do not necessarily overlook the animals which may appear quiet, scared, or overly excited. Talk to the staff regarding the animal's temperament, and remove the animal to a quiet place where you may better observe his personality.

It is important that the whole family meet the pet, including children and other pets. The meeting should take place in a quiet, neutral environment with the shelter staff present.

Waiting period: Many shelters will require a waiting period of 24 hours or more before you can take the animal home. This is to give you the time to think about your decision and talk over any concerns with the other family members. During the waiting period, the shelter will put a 'hold' on the animal so no one else can adopt her while you are waiting.

The adoption contract: In most cases, you will fill out a contract with the animal shelter when you adopt the pet. It may include provisions that you:

- Keep the animal as a domesticated pet
- Provide good housing, nutrition, and health care
- Have the pet spayed or neutered
- Allow post-adoption visits by the animal shelter
- Have had no history of animal abuse or neglect
- Will return the animal to the shelter if you can no longer care for her
- Have permission from your landlord to have a pet (if you rent)
- Understand the shelter will take the pet back if she is mistreated
- Will pay the associated costs for adopting the pet
- Have discussed adopting a new pet with all family members and they all agree on the new pet



Costs: In almost all cases, you will need to pay an adoption fee to the shelter. As part of the contract, you will be required to spay or neuter the pet if that has not already been done. Often, the shelter will provide you with a certificate that will pay for a portion of the surgery at participating veterinarians. If the animal has had any health problems while at the shelter, you may be asked to help with some of the costs; this varies between shelters. If you can, the shelter would always appreciate an additional contribution towards their programs.

Trial period: Some shelters offer a trial period in which you can take the pet home and see how he does in his new environment. Rarely, a behavioral or medical problem may be discovered that was not noticed in the shelter. Some shelters offer post-adoption assistance with helping you work through minor behavioral problems.

Benefits from adopting from shelters

Adopting pets from shelters can have many rewards. Many people say they are so happy that they could save the life of a wonderful animal by giving him a new and loving home. It is estimated that 4 to 6 million cats and dogs are euthanized in America's animal shelters every year. Shelters are filled with animals who were and could continue to be great pets, as well as animals who, with a little training, can become a cherished member of the family.

Animal shelters provide a wonderful mix of adoptable animals. Some are purebreds; others are virtually one of a kind. Animals are also of various ages. Many people prefer to have an older pet so there are no surprises about how big he will grow or the type of coat he may have.

Adopting an animal from a shelter is generally less expensive than acquiring an animal through a breeder or pet shop. Of course, you need to remember that the real financial cost of a pet over her lifetime is not her purchase price, but the food,

grooming, health care, toys, etc. If you do not have the money to buy an expensive pet, you need to carefully look at your finances to be sure you can afford any pet, and still provide the care she needs.

While it varies with the shelter, you can usually get good information on the temperament and personality of the animal you are interested in. You may even have access to his health records, and a good description of his life in his former home.

Many shelters now neuter and spay all animals before they can be adopted as pets. Others may provide you with a certificate that will pay for a portion of the surgery. Most of the animals have also been wormed and vaccinated. Most animals will be house trained, and many dogs, for instance, have some basic training.

Myths about animals from shelters

Some people think that all animals in shelters were surrendered because of behavioral problems. This is not true. Many animals in shelters have impeccable behavior and habits. If the reason the animal was brought to the shelter was a behavior problem, it may have been more a problem with the previous owner's behavior than the animal's. Training takes time, patience, and consistency; if the owner is lacking any of these, the animal's behavior will suffer.

Other people believe that you cannot train an adult dog: 'you can't teach old dogs new tricks.' This, too, is untrue. Older animals can easily learn bad habits or good habits; it is up to the owner.

Do adopted shelter animals need special care?

Animals in shelters are undergoing considerable stress. They may not be used to cages or other animals. They are missing their old territory, and in many cases, their loving owner who had to give them up. They may have been moved from their home, to the shelter, and now to a new home all in a very short time. Think of how moving is stressful for you and how hard it is to lose so many familiar things. The animals are experiencing the same thing. They may need extra patience, assurance, and guidance. They may need your presence more than other animals who have come into your home.



Bonding with your new pet is very important so spend as much time with her as you can. Play with her and be with her as she explores her new surroundings. Have her sleep in the same room as you. If your new pet is a dog, have her sleep in a crate next to the bed, or tied to the bed with a short rope.

Having a crate for your new pet is a good idea. You may think, 'but she has been caged in the shelter; I do not want to cage her again.' A cage in your home will be more like a den to your new pet and keep her safe while you are not around to monitor her activities. Some animals may find the space of a whole house overwhelming and find comfort in a small cozy place they can call their own.

Depending upon the physical condition of your new pet, special nutrition may be necessary. Some animals may be too fat, others too thin. Some may have had very poor nutrition in their previous home. Ask the shelter what they fed your new pet and continue feeding that for a week or more as your new pet adjusts. Then if you want to [change the diet](#), do it slowly.

In most cases, the shelter will try to bathe and groom your pet before you receive him. They may have limited time and facilities, however, so you may need to spend more time grooming your pet at first. Make it a happy and fun time. It will be a good time for you to bond to each other.

Take training slowly. Your new pet has a lot of adjustments to make. Train with patience, affection, and quiet firmness. Consistency is very important. Be sure you, and all family members, use the same commands in the same manner.

There are many books available for sale and in the library that provide excellent information on adopting and raising animals from shelters. It is well worth your time to read these - even better if you read them before the adoption.

Summary

Animal shelters provide an invaluable service of providing safe havens for animals and matching them to new, loving owners. Adopting an animal from a shelter can be a wonderful experience if you are well prepared for a new pet. Shelters are also a great place to volunteer your time. You will be glad you did.