

Chapter 1

So You Want to Adopt a Dog

This book is designed to guide you through the process of adopting a dog, and to help you to find that “right” dog. The right dog in your life is a sacred and unparalleled friend. The relationship between you and your dog will be more powerful than you can imagine, and more intensely rewarding than you will know until you actually do it. Adopting the right dog is likely to be the most gratifying thing you will ever do, and I would like you to find this exceptional dog at a shelter.

While I would like the animal shelter to be the premier place to obtain a dog, at the same time I recognize the truth that it can also be the worst. Animal shelters in the United States are filled with some of the very best and some of the very worst dogs. While thousands of absolutely wonderful, sweet family pet dogs are euthanized in shelters that do not have a lot of resources (or a lot of good adopters), the awful flip side is that thousands of aggressive and downright dangerous dogs are available for adoption to unsuspecting people, or are spinning interminably in their cages. Many shelters are run by well-meaning animal lovers who know little about dog behavior or temperament and can offer you little help in selecting the right dog.

I have dedicated my life to trying to make the shelter the best place for people to go to get a dog. That means replacing some of the pity and raw emotions shelter people use to make decisions on adoptions or euthanasia with a solid foundation of dog behavior and training knowledge. While I continue to

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work toward that goal within the shelter industry, I hope this book will help the general public successfully adopt safe, appropriate and wonderful dogs. I hope this book can serve as a guide so that if you do decide to go to the shelter, you're more likely to bring home a great companion and not a behaviorally disastrous dog.

My goal is to make life and death better and less random for dogs in shelters, and to make shelters safer and better for people visiting them. We need to educate people about the shelter world, and educate the shelter world about people. And educate everybody a little more about dogs.

With a boost of dog behavior knowledge and some tips on assessing temperament, this book will, hopefully, make your adoption experience a lifelong success. Living with a great dog is something no one should miss.

WHAT'S INVOLVED IN ADOPTING A DOG?

For first-time dog owners, your journey into life with a dog is about to begin. Your life is about to change forever. The people in your life will be different. Your schedule will change. Your activity level will go up. Your exercise routine will either begin or change for the better. It will become much harder to be depressed. There will now always be someone overjoyed to see you whenever you return home from work, and just as overjoyed to see you return to the room from a trip to the bathroom. There will, at last, be something substantial to vacuum up from your floors, as tumbleweeds of dog hair will form under your furniture daily.

For experienced dog owners, this may or may not be your first adoption experience. Either way, I want your next dog to be the best ever.

DO YOU THINK YOU'RE READY, OR DO YOU KNOW YOU'RE READY?

There are two basic kinds of people: There are people who readily admit to, want to and are ready to commit to joining the ranks of dog owners everywhere, and are choosing the shelter as their primary resource. For the others, becoming a new dog owner is the kind of thing that, the more they think about it, the more arduous or impossible it seems. The confines of their schedule and the demands and restrictions the dog will make on their life seem to exclude them from dog ownership. Or so they tell themselves. This group tells itself

that the time is just not right. And, on the outside, they may act like they're not ready. They are the browsers, the many people who come to the shelter "just looking." But on the inside, they really are ready—if the right dog were to come along.

The truth is, it is never really the right time. It is never really convenient to bring a dog into your life. There will probably never be a time in your life when your schedule is free and open, you have plenty of time and feel completely prepared. The truth is, there really is nothing convenient, ever, about having a dog. But it is worth every inconvenience. I'm not trying to convince someone who really doesn't want a dog to go out and get one. But chances are if you are reading this book, you are at least secretly ready—ready somewhere deep down inside—and you would take the plunge if you visited your local animal shelter and met the right dog.

We see this group of people in the shelter as often as we see the group that is absolutely ready, know they are ready, are hot on the trail of the right dog and want that dog now. Today. For this weekend. These people choose the animal shelter because shelters are filled with ready-made dogs. You don't have to research a breed, locate a good and reputable breeder, wait for the bitch to be bred, wait for the puppies to be born, and then wait yet another eight to 12 weeks until they are ready to be sold. At the shelter the dogs are there in front of you, available for adoption in the here and now.

You can either aim for the "right time" in your life to get a dog or aim for the "right dog" in your life. My advice is to go for the right dog. That may mean you don't find the dog of your dreams on your first visit to the shelter. Also, depending on where you live, there may not be a lot of dogs to choose from. The pet overpopulation problem is, thankfully, not what it used to be in many parts of the country, and many shelters, especially the ones that do not make available for adoption aggressive or dangerous dogs, may have more empty kennels than occupied ones.

YOUR PRE-ADOPTION CHECKLIST

Listed below are some suggested mental and physical preparations you can make before you come home with a dog. Mostly, they are things to think about, so that you don't bring a dog home and have all these thoughts come rushing at you at once. There is enough to do and to think about and feel overwhelmed with in first few days you have a new dog, so it can be helpful to try to mull over these things at least once before the dog comes home with you.

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Household Rules

Decide now on some household rules. These can be arbitrary at first if you have no particular rules in mind, or you may already know exactly what you will allow from your new dog. Either way, it is far better for your dog to enter a home where he senses many clear rules and regulations than to enter a chaotic situation where you try to implement the rules later on.

Even if you aren't by nature a rule-maker or rule-implementer, doing this with your new dog is a favor to him. Dogs love consistency, and they can relax when they understand the things you want and don't want right from the get-go. Dogs won't *judge* your rules; they will just start adhering to them as you insist. Your new dog is likely to be anxious and agitated in the first few days, and having you insist on some consistent rules will help him feel like he's making fewer mistakes and will give him a clear understanding of what is a mistake and what isn't.

When you're visiting an unfamiliar relative in a strange town, wouldn't you rather have your kin tell you up front please not to put your feet on the coffee table, please turn the heat down to 62° before going to bed, please feel free to eat anything in the refrigerator on all but the top shelf (which is food reserved for your diabetic uncle), etc., than to endure being yelled at and reprimanded for inadvertently doing all these things wrong? It is the difference between having the opportunity to get things right and feel good, and being left to get things wrong and get yelled at, feeling bad and confused without knowing what was right or wrong to start with.

It is much fairer to your dog to teach him what is acceptable and what is not. Some people don't have the personality type to have any preconceived rules in mind, and other people know automatically what they will tolerate and what they won't. Either type needs to set up a number of household rules and encourage, aid and reward the dog for getting them right, rather than starting off the relationship by yelling at him for getting it wrong, or worse, letting your new dog believe that in the absence of anyone with good leadership skills, he will make his own rules. You cannot really "build up" to getting your dog to listen to you, respect you and behave. The more a dog does what he wants and gets away with it, and the more you figure you'll let him settle in before dealing with that "pesky" behavior, the less likely your dog is to ever listen to you, do what you want or behave the way you want him to.

Teaching your dog how to sit, stay, lie down, come, stop barking and stop jumping up are easy enough. This sort of teaching should be accomplished using mostly reward-based training and positive reinforcement. These techniques are fast, fun and effective. But the *relationship* with your dog requires one of you to follow the lead of the other. Making sure, at the outset, that your new

dog follows your lead is best accomplished the minute he walks across the threshold. And it is accomplished by setting rules, guidelines and limits, and being willing to firmly and immediately tell your new dog “no” if and when he needs it.

Your new dog needs no adjustment period for this. Quite the contrary. Don’t think somehow your “poor” shelter dog has had a traumatic past and needs to be shown only love and kindness. Your new dog needs you to forget his past and start with his crisp new future—right now. He needs love, kindness and leadership. At best, when dogs are allowed to make all their own rules, they become anxious, agitated and have a difficult time settling down. These dogs tend to bark at any noise and end up becoming nuisance barkers woofing at every little bump in the night. Or they pace and pant in the house, never seeming to relax into a nap or even to lie down and relax. At worst, the dog who makes his own rules in the absence of any from you can behave more aggressively. Then your new dog may be experiencing a traumatic *present*, never mind his *past*.

More Things to Prepare

- Your new dog will not (initially, at least) be allowed up on your furniture or on your bed. This is a great example of a rule that is easy to implement at the start and then ease up on as things play out, but an extremely stubborn habit to break if you start out allowing it and decide later on to nix it.
- Your new dog will eat a high-quality dog food, twice a day, after the humans have dined, and will neither be fed from the table nor be allowed table scraps or snacks as you eat your own meals or snacks. (Leftovers and delicious human food, when you feel you must share it, should be set aside in a plastic zipper bag in the refrigerator and used for training purposes, during training sessions.) At first, every calorie should count for something; every morsel should be used as a reward for good behavior, or as a lure or reward when the dog is learning something new and desirable.
- Your new dog will be taught how to sit (see Chapter 7) or requested to sit (because chances are, your new dog already knows how to sit) at least 25 times a day, partly to practice having you give some commands and having your dog comply, but mostly so that at least 25 times a day you both can share the understanding and definition of at least one word in the human language. Soon, you will teach your dog many new

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words and behaviors, but sometimes at the beginning you will have just one word in common. Think of it as arriving in a foreign country, where you know just one word. No matter what the word, wouldn't it be a relief to hear someone use it with you in its proper context?

- You will have to decide on a good potty elimination area for your new dog *before* he comes home. If you live in the suburbs or the country, the area will likely be somewhere in your yard. If you dream of having a pristine lawn and want excrement only in the woods to the back of your property, spend the first few weeks reinforcing this with your new dog. This is the kind of thing that, if decided on beforehand, is easy and quick to teach your new dog, but is extremely time-consuming to try to implement after your dog has formed a habit of eliminating in a different area. If you live in the city, the best rule is to teach your dog to eliminate in the gutter directly outside your building (not on plants or on the sidewalk). Do NOT get into the habit of walking your dog all the way to the park to eliminate. Then you will be obliged to walk your dog all the way to the park in rain, snow or flu season.
- Take a tour around your own house, starting in any room. Get down to about the three-foot-high level and look over the entire room, scrutinizing every detail—electrical cords, outlets, carpet fringes, rare books on the bottom shelves, eyeglasses and eyeglass cases on coffee tables, pens, pencils on coffee tables, framed (metal, glass or plastic frames) photos, photo albums, anything made of wicker, any irreplaceable or expensive carpeting or rug that can be pulled up and stored away, any worn out or frayed corners of upholstery (too tempting for your dog to nibble), linoleum that is pulling up at its corners and molding that is bent or curled outward. All this must be repaired, moved or removed. Remove any and all pillows and throws from the furniture, and move into storage anything of sentimental or financial value that you would be devastated if it were gnawed on or worse, ruined with some unidentifiable fluid that came from your dog. Even after all this, Dr. Suzanne Hetts, a certified applied animal behaviorist in Denver, Colorado (who is also a dog trainer and adopter), likes to warn people that they need to expect to lose something of value when they bring a dog into their household. And she is right. Her own adopted Dalmatian chewed up and destroyed the only photograph she had left of her grandmother. Adopting a dog who is at least two years old greatly reduces your chances of having him destroy anything, because mature dogs seldom chew for reasons other than severe separation problems, which are relatively rare. The beauty



My dog, Hop Sing, caught shortly after having dragged a potted houseplant onto the couch.

in adopting an adult or older dog is that once you have lived with him for a few weeks and determine that he is not a chewer, you can quickly return your home and its contents back to normal.

- A crate can be a good idea, although many people are reluctant to consider one. A crate is a portable dog kennel, sometimes made of plastic (like airline carriers) and sometimes made of metal wire. Many people gasp and shudder at the thought of a crate for their dog, especially for an adopted dog, feeling that it is yet another cage and the dog will feel like he has gone from one cage to another. Although I do believe crates are often over-recommended, I also know they are a god-send for some dogs and have saved many a strained relationship between dog and owner. Crates can be especially useful for young, robust dogs, puppies and adolescents at the peak of their chewing prowess. Crating is also useful for house-training because most dogs will not soil inside a crate. When your new dog arrives, after acclimating him slowly to the crate (by placing treats in the back, placing a comfy blanket in it, feeding him his meals in it and giving him a peanut butter-stuffed hollow bone or toy only when he is confined in his new crate), confining him to a crate when you have to leave him

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alone or cannot watch him can mean the difference between a house full of poop and pee and a dog who holds it until you arrive home to take him to his appropriate potty spot. Crates are almost a necessary resource in your car, because an unbelted, uncrated dog in a moving vehicle can become a missile during an accident and injure you from inside the car—not to mention the harm to your dog. There are seat-belt restraints made specifically for dogs riding in cars, and they can be useful. But, true confessions—I know not only the logic but the safety of what I've just said, but my five dogs ride as free as missiles in my car—and I worry (fruitlessly) each time I drive about what will happen to them if I have even a minor fender-bender.

- Look at your schedule over the next few weeks and re-schedule any dinner engagements away from home, or change them so that your friends are coming to your home and you are cooking for them (or ordering take-out). While you don't want to glue yourself to your home with your new dog, you don't want to schedule a full day's work *and* then dinner out—thereby leaving your new dog home alone for more than 10 hours. Remember, you have a responsibility at home now, and you will need to schedule time to come home, after being out for more than a few hours, to walk your dog.
- Seek out, *before you need them*, pet sitters, boarding kennels or other dog owners willing to swap dog-sitting or dog-walking services. There are times when emergencies come up, and you will suddenly need someone to go to your home and walk your dog. It's easier to do this research before you need help.
- There is no dire need to purchase items like dog bowls, grooming items and dog food *before* you actually bring home your new dog (you really won't know what your new dog will look like—how big or small, what type of coat, etc.), and you can buy all these items on your way home from the shelter. However, I do advise prepurchasing odor-neutralizing clean-up products and having them ready. The best product to have around to clean up any bodily fluids that may come from your dog (since you'll find out soon enough that many mysterious and hideous fluids do come out of dogs) is an enzymatic product—that is, one that uses enzyme action to neutralize the odor, not just cover it up. The first place you might meet these fluids are in your car on the way home from the shelter. I recommend buying a couple of gallons of odor-neutralizing liquid. Fill a few empty spray bottles and keep them in different rooms, plus one in the car.

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- Buy many rolls of paper towels to have on hand, to go with your enzymatic cleaner. Place one roll in every room of your house, and one in the car.
- Check out and familiarize yourself with all the hiking trails, state parks, community parks, rail trails and bike paths in your area, and plan daily outings with your new dog. Not only is exploring these areas fun and interesting, but you'll appreciate the extra exercise and incentive for getting out and about that your new dog will provide. Dogs do best when they get at least one off-territory walk a day. Not only is the exercise and olfactory stimulation fun for them, but it can help keep them from getting too territorial about their own home and yard.
- Set your alarm clock for half an hour earlier in the morning. You'll need to get used to waking up earlier in the day to accommodate walking, playing with and feeding (and walking again) your new dog.

With all that said, the majority of adopters are actually surprised by how easy it is to have a dog. At our shelter we offer adopters a free six-week training course of their choice with every adoption (Puppy Kindergarten, Adolescent Manners, Introduction to Agility or Basic Manners), and many times the adopter will call back a week or so after bringing home their dog and say they don't know what course to sign up for because their dog doesn't seem to need any training. Mind you, these are invariably the adopters of adult dogs, or senior dogs, which might inspire more people to adopt these rather than puppies or adolescents.

I, personally, have never adopted a dog with whom I didn't initially have moments of panic and thoughts of, "Oh my, what have I done?" (and I've adopted 13 dogs over the years—not all at once!). And I have never regretted a single adoption. On the contrary, I feel blessed with the most wonderful dogs a person could ever have.

TAKE A LOOK AT YOUR OWN LIFESTYLE

- If you live with another person or other people, it will be important to look for a dog who is compatible with all the residents in the household.
- If you have children or might have children within the next five to 10 years, look for a dog who will do well in a home with young children, even if you have none yet. Nothing is more heartbreaking than to watch a couple have to give up their beloved companion dog because

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they have had a baby and the dog is aggressive toward children. If the card on the dog's cage or someone at the shelter recommends a home with no young children, anticipate your future and err on the side of safety.

- Do young children visit your home? How often? Then even if you do not have and do not plan to have children, you, too, will need to adopt a dog who is compatible with young children. A friend of mine is head of the dog training and behavior center at a large shelter. She and her staff are responsible for temperament testing all the dogs to see whether they should go up for adoption or be euthanized because of aggression. The importance of temperament testing and good match-making was underscored for her when her youngest daughter's piano teacher (a single, adult woman) adopted an adult Siberian Husky from her shelter. Each week, her daughter goes to the home of the piano teacher for a lesson, and now each week, a lovely Siberian Husky rests his head on her daughter's lap during the lesson. Imagine if the piano teacher had adopted a dog who was aggressive with children! Even though the piano teacher lives alone, children are in her life.
- Do you currently have other pets in your home? A cat? Another dog? A rodent or a bird? Then you will need help finding a dog who is compatible, as much as anyone can predict, with these species. A middle-aged couple came to our shelter looking to adopt a dog. Their only requirements, they said, were that the dog had to get along with chickens and not run away. They didn't care what their dog would look like or about size, age or gender. They lived on 70 unfenced acres in the middle of the Catskill Mountains and shared the property with another couple, who kept free-range chickens. Any dog they adopted would have to meet those requirements, to the best of anyone's predictions. The couple made a few trips to the shelter before we finally had a dog whose temperament tested as a possible match. We had a seven-month-old female dog who had very little predatory instinct (she was tested around large farm animals and cats, since we had no chickens to test her with—except for chicken in our refrigerators, which is not very helpful) and a very sociable and affectionate nature that would likely keep her from straying off when she was outside with her new owners. We phoned the couple to tell them we had found a possible match. They came, met, visited with and fell in love with Cedar Syrup, a young, chocolate-colored Pit Bull mix. Yes, Pit Bull mix. Although many of the bull breeds can be quite predatory, not all are,

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and the temperament test becomes the great, objective equalizer that judges each dog as an individual.

- What access will you and your dog have to aerobic exercise? Do you have a fenced-in yard? Do you have an unfenced yard? Will your dog be walked on a leash? Will you be depending on dog parks for the only off-leash exercise? Then it will be important to adopt a dog who plays well with other dogs. Are you sedentary or active by nature? Are your personal outlets for aerobic exercise ones that could include your dog? Membership at a gym will do your active Labrador Retriever mix no good, since you can't take your dog with you. If you mountain bike or hike or go for brisk walks or jog, these are exercise regimes that welcome an active dog. If you're a bit of a slug, you'll need a sluggish, low-key kind of dog to adopt. And remember, a fenced yard in itself does not exercise your dog. Most dogs who live in homes with fenced-in yards will not go outside and exercise on their own. Companion dogs want your companionship. If you let the dog out into your yard and you remain inside, your dog will sit at the doorway, staring dolefully and waiting for you to come out and play. And if you leave your dog in the yard while you go to work, he will likely spend most of his day sleeping. So no matter what your access to an exercise area for your new dog, include yourself in the plan.
- How much time away from home do you spend each day? The formula for how long a puppy can be happily left alone is to take their age in months and add one, up to eight months—at which point nine hours becomes the very top limit. For example, a four-month-old puppy can be left alone for up to five hours at a time, a two-month-old for three hours. These figures are for daytime, as most puppies older than eight to 10 weeks can last through the night. So if your work keeps you out of the house for seven hours (including your commute), you shouldn't adopt a puppy under the age of six months unless you can change your schedule or hire someone to come and visit with your puppy while you're away. This is not just for housebreaking. Puppies and dogs need human company. The longer they are isolated, the crazier they are when you return home, not just from lack of exercise or the need to eliminate, but because they have been lonely and need company.

Whatever your personal lifestyle, it will be enhanced by a dog. There is no other species out there like them. They'll burrow into your heart in surprising ways.

