

Should You Adopt a Shelter Dog With Behavior Issues?

Today is National Mutt Day, and I'm addressing one of the biggest elephants in the room about shelter dogs: behavior challenges. While it's true that more than half of dogs at any shelter may be there because of behavior problems, here's what you need to know about these abandoned pups.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- It's National Mutt Day 2024, which means it's time to celebrate saving the lives of mixed breed dogs in shelters and rescues across the U.S. and the world
- One of many great reasons to add a mutt to your family is that you can pick exactly the right canine companion for your household and lifestyle
- Another reason, and the most important, is that you'll be saving a precious life
- When considering adopting a mutt, it's important to learn which breed mixes might be best suited to your lifestyle; it's also important to plan for how you'll manage any behavior issues your new pet may have

It's National Mutt Day 2024 (aka National Mixed Breed Day), which comes around twice each year, on July 31st and December 2nd.

National Mutt Day was created in 2005 to celebrate mixed breed dogs and save as many precious lives as possible. The goal is to gently remind everyone that there are countless lovable, deserving mutts waiting in shelters across the U.S. and the world, hoping for a family to take them home.

10 Reasons to Adopt a Shelter Mutt

1. **Mutts are more flexible** — While purebred dogs have been "ordered" with a prescribed set of attributes, such as natural hunting skills or a certain physical appearance, mutts have their own brand of cuteness, good nature, and ability to go with the flow, in many circumstances. A mutt may adjust more readily because no one will have any expectations for her to be a shepherd or trick performer — she'll just be herself, which is awesome.
2. **They're unique** — No one in the world has a dog exactly like the mixed breed dogs you'll find at your local shelter. The breed variations that mutts represent make for a much wider selection when you set off to find a forever friend. The furry favorite might have a bit of a curl to his coat, or his ears might be a little more pointed than you'd expect.

In contrast, purebred dogs tend to be "cookie cutter" in their sameness. The standard for purebreds is that they look and behave similarly. Your standard mutt is unique!

3. **Mature dogs, not just puppies, are available** — If you're ready to find a furry friend at the shelter, but the thought of going through all the stages of raising a puppy seems daunting, never fear — plenty of wonderful adult mutts are ready and waiting. You'll be able to choose a dog at just the right age, size, and temperament to fit your family, with no awkward or unplanned-for surprises.
4. **They require less cash up front** — Purebred dogs offered by breeders can run into the hundreds or even thousands of dollars when prospective pet parents decide to adopt. A much better value, pound for pound, is a mutt, whose adoption fee will probably run from \$50 to \$100.
5. **Many mutts are already housetrained** — The reasons dogs are relinquished to shelters are varied and numerous, but most are brought in through no fault of their own. Many of the mixed breed dogs in shelters were once members of a family and may already be housetrained.
6. **They can be trained as service dogs** — Some may think only purebreds can be trained to be service dogs, but that's not the case. Mutts are every bit as trainable in the arena of helping humans. They've achieved remarkable success on a lot of fronts, helping the blind and deaf, people suffering from illness and PTSD, not to mention their skills as therapy and emotional support dogs.
7. **Mutts can compete, too** — While purebreds might be sought after as competitors in a number of categories, such as showmanship or pedigree, mixed breeds can compete as well. The most common arena for mutts might be in agility competitions, according to the North American Dog Agility Council (**NADAC**), which is "open to dog and handler teams of all ages and competing at any level or division."

Mixed breeds can also compete in United Kennel Club (UKC) events, dock jumping, and a wide range of other canine-centered (not breed exclusive) activities.

8. **They may have fewer health issues** — If you seek out a dog breeder when you're ready to open your home to a pet, you may run across dogs with physical problems because they were purposely bred to look a certain way. Some breeds have tendencies toward particular health issues, while mixed breed pups may be healthier, overall. Breed-specific disorders include hypothyroidism, cardiomyopathy, cataracts, and elbow dysplasia.
9. **The awesomeness of mutts is contagious** — Purebred pups are somewhat predictable. Mutts, on the other hand, represent spontaneity and a sense of adventure. If you're looking for friendship, loyalty, stress reduction and devotion all in one furry package, adopting a mutt will bring a new brand of awesome into your life.
10. **You're saving a life** — When you adopt a dog from a shelter, you're saving a precious life. Most homeless pups are mutts, and shelters too often opt to euthanize those who've been deemed unadoptable or have simply been there too long. When you choose your own sweet mixed breed at the shelter and take him home, you're literally saving a life. What's more awesome than that?

How to Find the Perfect Mutt for Your Family

If you've never owned a dog, you'll need to do lots of research to understand which breeds are best suited for your activity level and lifestyle. The dog's age will also be a factor — puppies and young dogs generally require more effort than older dogs.

Not all small breeds are lap dogs. Some small dogs are very high energy and require lots of daily exercise. Some large breed dogs have low exercise requirements and can be content living in relatively small quarters. That's why research is so important — especially since dogs found in animal shelters will have characteristics and temperaments that cross a

variety of different breeds.

Once you're at the animal shelter or rescue facility, choose wisely, not impulsively. This is the ultimate challenge for dog lovers, because you have to let your brain and not just your heart lead the way.

And while it's true some adoptive parents know the minute they lay eyes on a certain dog that he belongs with them, I recommend you talk first with knowledgeable shelter employees about what kind of pup best suits you, especially in terms of temperament.

Allow them to point you in a direction. If you're an animal lover, every set of eyes looking at you through bars will tug at your heart. Keep your brain engaged as well so that you make the best choice for both you and the dog you adopt.

Dealing With Behavior Challenges

It's important to realize that, according to shelter stats, well over half the dogs at any shelter have behavior problems that caused their previous owners to give them up. This isn't the fault of the dogs. They depended on humans for their socialization and training, and someone along the way let them down.

Some perfectly behaved dogs wind up in shelters, including those that outlive their humans, or must be rehomed due to circumstances beyond the family's control. But many dogs end up homeless because humans let them down on the training and relationship front. Poor parenting yields poor behaviors.

Because your prospective canine companion may come to you with behaviors you'd like to change or improve, you should be prepared to put in the time and effort required to help him overcome them in a way that never breaks his trust. Behavior modification using fear-free handling and a positive reward system is the key to encouraging good behavior and extinguishing undesirable behavior.

You may be able to accomplish this on your own, or you may need the help of your veterinarian or an **animal behavior specialist**. There's also a wonderful stress-relieving program I recommend to all new parents of adopted or rescued dogs that helps them adjust to a new home in the least stressful manner. You can find it at **A Sound Beginning**, and you can immediately begin using the book's tips and tricks and the calming music CD on your dog's first day home.
