

Adoption Tips: Picking the Right Pet for You

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Choosing to adopt an animal is a long-term, life-changing decision. But when faced with many possible pets, the excitement of the search and all the activity a shelter or an animal's current home, how can you make sure you are bringing the right pet into your home? Sherrie Petty and Allison Willoughby, a staff and faculty member, respectively, in the Utah State University School of Veterinary Medicine, have advice about choosing the best pet for your situation and providing them with the best possible care.

One key to a successful adoption is being well-prepared before the search begins. Pet adopters need to consider their lifestyle, financial means and the high level of commitment that is required.

"There are a lot of costs to adopting, including the adoption fee and veterinary bills, food, equipment, time etc.," Petty said. "No relationships, including those with animals, come without the commitment of yourself. Be sure you are ready."

It's important to look for an animal that fits your lifestyle and situation, and an animal you can bond with. Both Petty and Willoughby encourage potential pet adopters to work closely with the shelter staff to help them find the pet that will be the best fit.

"Often the shelter can give you some idea of the personality of your pet," Willoughby said. "The shelter may be able to guide to you an animal that is good with larger, chaotic families. A dog that is fearful or nervous is going to gain more confidence in a quieter household. If you want a dog that will be able to run or bike with you, it's probably not a good idea to get a short-legged, flat-faced dog, unless you plan on carrying him in a basket."

Willoughby also encouraged pet owners to consider what they want the relationship with their pet to look like and to make sure that vision fits with the same type of animal. Factors for consideration include activity level of pet and owner, size of the pet, confidence and sensitivity level and ability to get along with other animals.

For example, different breeds of dogs have different energy levels, and therefore, different requirements. High-energy dogs (such as shepherds, heelers, some terriers and retrievers) need more mental and physical stimulation. They are always ready to go and are great for people who are physically active and have more time on their hands. Medium energy dogs (hounds, Corgi, some spaniels and Dachshunds) still like to be active, but they are just as happy to relax and are typically a better fit for some families.

Low energy dogs, on the other hand (Shih Tzu, Pekingese, Basset hound), are completely different.

"Low energy dogs enjoy a walk around the block or a game of fetch in the house. They just like to be with you and watch you cook, garden or do woodworking," Willoughby said. "They will not like jogging endlessly on leash and they might look at you like you're crazy if you want them to fetch the ball more than twice in a row."

If adopters are looking for an animal that is happy to be alone for long periods during the day, Willoughby suggests adopting a cat.

Sometimes animals that are up for adoption have had a rough past and have been abused and mistreated. These pets need to be taken care of by people they can associate with to build trust and who have the time and patience to give them the care they need.

“What an amazing gift to assist an animal who has come from an abusive or neglectful situation,” Petty said. “Sometimes these animals are the most grateful. But you must understand, not unlike people with PTSD, it takes time and sometimes they never totally recover from those experiences. You then have to love them for who they are and where they are now.”

No matter how cute he is, Petty emphasized that sometimes the pet just isn't a good fit for certain families and situations, and individuals need to recognize that.

“There are many adoptable animals,” Petty said. “But not all will be suitable for all families.”

Owners also need to keep in mind that the adoption process is a stressful time for animals. Adopters shouldn't be surprised if their pet behaves differently at home than they did at the shelter and it may take them a while to adjust to their new surroundings.

“Think ahead before you bring a new pet home about how you are going to acclimate them to their new environment and family members,” Petty said. “Go slow. Don't assume what you see in the first week or two is a true measure of your new pet's personality.”

Petty added that adopters should include the entire family when it comes to acclimating the new pet. This includes teaching children how to be appropriate and respectful towards animals and learning how to gain their trust. Consistency is important when it comes to setting rules about pet behavior. For example, are animals allowed on furniture, in the kitchen, etc? The whole family should know the rules and follow them.

Pet owners often think they are getting a deal on a vaccinated, microchipped and neutered pet, which they are, but are surprised when there are other things that need to be done post adoption. These pets have been in high-stress environments and are often exposed to different diseases. If exposed before the vaccine is effective, they could still get sick.

Willoughby recommended that all pets at home also be up-to-date on their vaccinations before the new animal arrives.

“Keeping everyone vaccinated can help decrease illness and vet bills on your animals at home,” Willoughby said. “Most vaccinations take 2 weeks to be effective. Dogs should also receive their Bordetella vaccine, which they may not have had done. The intranasal version is effective in 48 hours.”

Planning ahead can deter many potential problems. Owners should call their veterinarian ahead of time of and discuss their plans to adopt. Veterinarians can help create a personal health care plan that will keep all pets safe and healthy during this transition.

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