

Rehoming Pets

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Several clients would like advice on adopting a shelter or rescue animal. How can we prepare them for the adjustments that rehoming “recycled pets” involves?

The initial decisions that clients must make when they choose to take on a relinquished animal do not differ from those when they adopt a puppy or a kitten. Both kinds of adoptions require an answer to the questions: “Why do you want a pet?” and “What pet fits best into your lifestyle?” People tend to lose interest quickly in vanity purchases, and dogs bought for guarding purposes can become overwhelming, especially for older clients who did not understand what they were getting.¹

Honest Assessments vs. “Romance”

Picking the right pet may mean pre-pet counseling. A service that advises clients of the attributes of different pets or breeds could be invaluable and in fact could serve to discourage pet ownership in some circumstances. Good client education must include honest assessment of the best type of pet for their lifestyle and understanding why many pets are recycled in the first place.

Most advice for deciding on the appropriate type of pet is geared toward cats and dogs, but clients with limited mobility might fare better with a smaller animal, such as a guinea pig. Clients who love birds that talk must realize that the best talkers are also among the longest-lived of the birds; require work to teach them to talk; only start to talk once out of babyhood; and tend to be the larger, more forceful psitticines and as such, could injure someone. The time to deprive clients of the “romance” is before they get an inappropriate pet. Clients who seek information that is offered become realistic when allowed to make their own educated decisions.¹

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Inherent Traits and Differences

Cats and dogs are different. Clients must first understand the basics of feline and canine social systems, roles by domestication, general behavioral characteristics, and any relevant health concerns for the species of interest (e.g., immunosuppressed individuals may not want to take on a pet with sharp claws, and they need to know how to control specific risks like toxoplasmosis), and general behavioral characteristics of the species of interest. They then need to focus on the range of sizes within that species. The size of a pet can affect client mobility. Some large or energetic and powerful dogs can drag elderly people and knock down and scare small children. In these situations, head collars can facilitate control of and communication with the dog, and help it learn better manners. House-training small dogs may be problematic for older or busy individuals in light of the frequency with which they need to be taken outside. Small dogs, and especially nervous ones, can be a trip hazard for small children and the elderly. Finally, larger dogs produce more feces, which can be a concern if the client intends to comply with clean-up laws. The type of exercise required, grooming needs, and the cost of maintaining a larger pet must also be taken into account.

Among other considerations are activity level and financial responsibilities. Activity levels can be associated with size, but they are more directly related to the dog's age and, in the case of dogs, the type of work for which the breed was selected. Financial considerations include adoption fees or nonbreeder purchase, vaccinations, neutering, license fees, fecal examinations, preventive care, food, and the expense of one major illness. The average annual expenditure for veterinary medical care in the United States in 1996 was around \$200 for dogs and \$150 for cats.



WHAT TO DO

- Ask why clients want a pet and assist in determining what type fits their lifestyle
- Review considerations of pet ownership: size, activity level, financial responsibilities, specific needs, and expectations
- Advise that the pet the clients see in the shelter may differ from the one that has had 3 to 4 months to settle in following adoption.

Expectations and Tolerance

Clients also should identify whether they have specific needs or expectations for the new pet. For example, people who do not want to spend time grooming and who are averse to fur on their furniture should not have longhaired cats. There is no substitute for common sense and an honest self-assessment of client needs and expectations.

When addressing specific expectations, any developmental changes should be discussed. Data show that puppy temperament tests do not reflect or predict later adult behavior.^{2,3} Some clients will be better served by adopting an older pet whose behaviors are known. Shelters, rescue organizations, and some breed groups can recommend dogs and cats with known behavioral propensities.

Acknowledging the Damage

Clients should keep in mind that when they adopt a shelter or "recycled" pet, it is damaged but not irreparably. How can an animal—taken from a home where it has bonds, knows where

it sleeps and eats, and knows the turf—not be damaged? Because of this damage and uncertainty, the pet seen in the shelter may not be the pet at home in the 3 to 4 months following adoption. The behavioral outcome may be good (e.g., the dog actually likes children and learns not to be afraid of cats) or bad (e.g., the dog begins to growl at strangers and won't let the clients on the bed). It is important that clients know that it takes this long for some animals to recover sufficiently to show their "true" personalities. The shorter the pet remains at the shelter and the more honest the original clients are in their reasons for relinquishing the pet, the more likely the shelter staff can work through a successful adoption.

Special issues are involved in rehoming pets, including those that may not be adequately addressed by shelters. If clients can learn to anticipate them, the chance of success improves. The most important aspect of rehoming pets involves how to avoid it. ■

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references, contacts, and appendices.