

Both Ends of the Leash

Pick of the Shelter

Patricia B. McConnell

“Chewed it in half!” he said. “In half!” The man on the phone was explaining to me why he had returned a dog named Lassie to the Humane Society. He'd taken her home on Thursday evening, after falling in love with her pinto fur and the black spot around one eye. Now it was Friday, and he had just returned from taking her back to the shelter. “She was so sweet,” he said, “but when I left her alone in my bedroom when I had to work, she peed on the carpet and chewed my belt into pieces. I had to take her back, I can't put up with that.”

Lassie is tucked up against my feet as I write this. Lucky me, I got her two days later – a year-old Border Collie, as sweet as a Krispy Kreme doughnut with a disposition as solid as Grecian marble. There's not a dog alive who is incapable of biting, but the chance that Lassie would bite a human is microscopically small. I've had her eight years now, and if I ever get another dog as good as her I probably won't deserve it. She is quite simply the sweetest, most responsive and most easily trained dog I've ever handled. She's brilliant on sheep, adores screaming children and does just about everything I ask of her. I felt a little sorry for the man who brought her back, but I've gotten over it. His inability to evaluate a shelter dog got me the dog of my dreams.

Like everyone who goes to a shelter to get a dog, Lassie's potential owner had to make a decision. Based on what he could see, in the limited time that he had, he made a decision about who Lassie was and whether she could fit into his life. Like most dog lovers, he didn't know what aspects of her behavior were immutable and which ones would respond to training and conditioning. You can hardly blame him; behaviorists and trainers aren't so sure either.

The question, as important to professionals as it is to prospective owners, is how to predict a dog's behavior in one environment based on her behavior in another one. Temperament testing of shelter dogs



has become a controversial issue in the dog world, and understandably so. The stakes are high and our knowledge is limited. That doesn't mean that tremendous strides haven't been made. Leaders in the field, such as Sue Sternberg and Emily Weiss, deserve our undying gratitude for their efforts to create a standardized test to evaluate the disposition of a dog in a shelter. We've come a long way, baby, but that doesn't mean we've arrived.

So what's a prospective owner to do? In my last column I spoke about the important influence of genetics on behavior, but at a shelter you don't have the luxury of meeting your prospective dog's parents. How do you decide whether or not to take that doe-eyed shelter dog home? Although I could never cover this complicated issue thoroughly in a column, here are some thoughts to help you pick out a good match if you don't know anything about a dog's relatives.

First off, a reality check is in order. It is impossible to perfectly predict the behavior of a dog in one context when you're doing the evaluation in another. Period. End of sentence. Impossible. The dog you see at the shelter is not necessarily going to be the dog you see after he's gotten his paws on the ground at your house. A lot of people give that concept lip service, but they don't really get it. It is simply not always possible to predict how each and every dog will behave once he or she leaves the shelter, and no matter how sophisticated temperament tests become, it never will be. I've seen hundred of dogs in my office who were sugar-sweet in all but one context – whether it's the kid on the skateboard or the Sheltie

across the street – and you'd never predict their aggressive behavior if you hadn't see it happen.

Of course, there are lots of dogs who behave in ways that *do* predict trouble down the road, and even some dogs who behave the same way no matter where they are or what they're doing. But there are far more dogs whose behavior varies – who are, for example, stunned into silence in the shelter but bark joyfully and relentlessly once they've slept in your bedroom for a few weeks. This shouldn't be much of a surprise, since our species is the same. You don't really know someone after drinks in a fancy bar, do you?

We can't expect dogs to be complex, thinking, feeling family members on one hand and then behave like inflexible machines on the other. That's why shelter staff and prospective dog owners are wise to borrow from scientists and think about future behavior in terms of a probability statement. Good behaviorists do this all the time, because predicting a dog's behavior is like predicting the weather. The best you can do is make a statement about what is most likely to happen in the future, based on all the information you have. There are simply too many factors that influence the weather to make responsible guarantees. That's why weathermen and scientists aren't distressed that weather predictions aren't accurate every day of the year; they know that they can't be. If you habitually complain about weather predictions being inaccurate, you might want to reexamine your understanding of a probability statement.

The implications for shelters and potential adopters are simple. Shelters should adopt dogs out for probationary periods, and welcome back with open arms any that don't work out. Of course, in the ideal world, the dog has been evaluated and is going to a home that looks like a good fit in the first place, but we all need to be prepared for the equivalent of a surprise thunderstorm. It's not loving or responsible to keep a dog who is afraid of your four-year-old child, or who begins to terrorize your thirteen-year-old resident dog. And it's not good shelter management to refuse to take a dog back after it has been adopted. (Those of you in enlightened areas might be surprised to hear how common this is in some parts of the country.)

I'm not saying it's easy to take a dog back, but no one said that the right thing to do was easy, it's just right. Ideally, shelters should help by counseling adopters about which problems might be easily fixed (like chewing on a belt) and which problems might suggest the dog would be better off in another family (like growling at the children).

I can imagine at this point that some readers might think I'm discouraging them from adopting from a shelter. Far from it. I highly recommend it. The three best places to find a dog are shelters rescue organizations and good breeders who stand by their dogs no matter what. None of these options provide guarantees, not even the best breeders, who know the dog's genetics. If a breeder tells you that he or she has been breeding for twenty years and has never had a problem puppy, you should smile sweetly and run for the hills. The probability of that happening, no matter how careful the breeding, is infinitesimally small. Breeding is a game of odds too, not a blueprint written in ink.

Once you've acknowledged that this is a game with a certain amount of chance, the trick is to get the odds on your side. You can best do that at a shelter by finding one that does temperament testing and (here's the hard part) believing what they say about the results. Evaluations at shelters may result in probability statements rather than guarantees, but that doesn't mean they should be ignored. If the meteorologist on television says it's going to be 95 degrees and humid on Saturday, I'm not going to plan to spend the day outside. If she's wrong, I'll be pleasantly surprised, but I'd have been stupid to make an inflexible plan that most likely would have turned me and my Border Collies into puddles.

Accordingly, just because a dog snarled and bit the plastic Sternbergian “Assess-a-hand” in a temperament test doesn't guarantee that he's going to bite your child, but are you going to take the risk? That's be akin to going surfing in a hurricane, or worse, sending your child out to do so. Sure, there's a chance it might work out, but the odds are not exactly in your favor.

The best predictions will be made by a staff that has been thoroughly trained and has had a lot of experience handling and testing dogs. To be most

helpful, temperament assessments need to be done in the same place in the same way, with clear, objective measures of behavior. But I also advocate that temp tests include a subjective category in which experienced evaluators can say something like: “I can't tell you why, but there's something about this dog that makes me nervous.” Subjective impressions, if they are made by well-trained and experienced people, can be very useful. Professionals in the most rigorous of fields know that gut feelings have value and should be included with all the other data when making a decision. The key is to be crystal clear about which is which: which parts of the evaluation contain objective, quantifiable measures and which parts are based on subjective impressions.

If you are lucky enough to have a shelter with a staff that does good testing, pay attention to their results. You're the one who's most likely to be overly influenced by a cute face, they're the ones who work with dogs all day long for a living. You just might want to listen to them.

Meanwhile, long before you fall in love with some handsome charmer in the shelter, what you can be doing is deciding what kind of a dog is right for you. That's the easy part. The hard part is not throwing your carefully developed criteria out the window once confronted with some endearing fluff-ball hunkering in the corner kennel. Taking along an objective friend who is well aware of your criteria can help keep you focused. Taking along young kids can do the opposite, so you might want to make it an adults-only trip the first time you go to the shelter. Bring the kids in once you've narrowed it down to a few suitable candidates. Here are some things that your list needs to include. They may seem obvious and trite, but be aware that I mention them because they are factors that I most often see resulting in mismatches.

Exercise needs and activity level: Many of the dogs at shelters are high-energy adolescents whose exercise needs overwhelm their owners. These can be great dogs for young couples who love to play outside and go hiking, and nothing but trouble for a family with four young children. You'd take this item as seriously as it deserves if you could sit in my office and hear, day in and day out, the legions of people who feel guilty because they know their dog

isn't getting enough exercise. Ask the shelter staff to give you their best estimate of how much a particular dog needs, and be realistic about how much more time you have in your life to give a dog both mental and physical exercise. The 20-minute leash walk that many people define as exercise is barely enough to warm up a young retriever or herding dog.

Size: Size matters in dogs, honest. Field-bred Labradors aren't just full of energy, they grow up into big, powerful dogs who can bowl over young children and elderly parents like pins in a bowling alley. However, some of the really big dogs actually need the least exercise, so don't assume you should avoid big dogs because you don't own 20 acres. Distinguish between a big dog with high activity levels (a field-bred Labrador) versus a big dog who's a couch potato (a retired racing Greyhound comes to mind).

Reactivity and arousal levels: Dogs who are reactive to sights and sounds can kick ass as performance dogs, because they listen so well and are so quick to respond. But they can be disastrous as family pets, because they listen so well and are so quick to respond. It's one thing to have a Border Collie who reacts to your slightest movement in a sheep dog trail, it's another to have one who leaps off the couch every time your six-year-old dashes through the living room. There are two reasons good temperament tests include a segment in which the dog is hyped up and excited. One is to find out what the dog does when crazed with excitement – start leaping at your face and biting at you? The second is to learn, once excited, how long it takes the dog to calm down. Look for the dog who stays relatively polite even when highly aroused, and who can calm down reasonably fast.

People oriented: Most people want a dog who likes people, but often mistake rude, overly exuberant dogs as being “friendly.” Leaping up and knocking you over isn't necessarily friendly, it's either a sign of high arousal, a lack of respect for personal space or perhaps just a goofy adolescent who never learned good manners. Ask the shelter staff to help you tell the difference. I myself would avoid the dog who body slams me instead of greets me, or who ignores me completely and obsessively sniffs around the room.

Looks matter in two ways: Good looks can cause you no end of trouble – just ask a marriage counselor. Guard against throwing your list of criteria out the window for the dog whose appearance overrides your ability to make an objective decision. This is another great reason to bring a friend along. She can remind you, as you get melty-kneed over the Australian Shepherd making goo-goo eyes at you from his kennel, that you swore you wouldn't take home a herding dog. You might be interested to know that most people prefer dogs with some white on them, and pass up the all-brown or all-black dogs. Now that you now that, look carefully, because one of those plain Janes might just be the best dog you'll ever have. But ironically, looks matter in another way. Although it might sound contradictory, it never hurts to get a dog who makes your heart smile when you look at her. I think, basically, it gets down to this: Good looks can overcome some minor deficits, but can't begin to compensate for a serious mismatch.

After all my talk about probabilities and weather predictions, I'm sure you won't be surprised when I say that none of the above will guarantee that you'll get the perfect dog. But I hope it raises the odds, and that you end up with the doggy equivalent of sunshine and blue skies when you make the humane and benevolent step of adopting a dog from a shelter or a rescue group. May you all end up with Lassies, and may all the world's Lassies find homes.

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