



How to adopt
THE PERFECT SHELTER DOG

a 3LOSTDOGS.COM guide

INTRODUCTION

Let me just say: I love dog adopters who do their research.

Seriously. If you're reading this, I love you.

Way too often, people don't think about what kind of dog is best for them. They choose a dog on impulse, falling in love with the first cute puppy they see. Yeah, puppies are cute. But if you don't look past the fluffy adorableness and actually find a dog who fits your lifestyle, a few months down the line you'll regret your decision.

If you're familiar with 3LostDogs.com, you probably know me as a dog trainer. But I've also been working in animal shelters for years. I volunteer as an adoption counselor for one of the largest animal shelters in the US, helping match animals with the right families. The first question I

always ask potential adopters is, "What are you looking for in a dog?" You would not believe how many people respond with, "Oh, I dunno..." Sigh.

With this guide, I'll walk you through the decision-making process that will help ensure you go home with the best pet possible. This process requires a bit of time and work, but if you complete it, you'll be setting yourself up for a great relationship with your new dog.

So let's counsel your adoption, shall we?

PART ONE: Painting the picture of your perfect dog

WHY DO YOU WANT A DOG?

Figuring out why you want a dog will go a long way toward figuring out the best dog for you. Let's take a look at some common answers I've received to the "What are you looking for in a dog?" question.

"For my kids." A dog and a child who are well-matched to each other can develop an amazing bond. The child gains a playmate and confidant. The dog loves having a mini-human at the perfect height to give slobbery kisses.

Dog ownership can teach children compassion, responsibility, and patience. Sounds pretty freakin' idyllic, doesn't it?

However (and it's a pretty big "however"), there are many factors involved to produce the Disney-fied relationship described above. First, who is driving the decision to get a dog? If your kids are nagging relentlessly and you're just going along with it, maybe reconsider. Your kids probably swear that they'll be the ones to feed

and walk and groom and clean up after the dog, and I'm sure they will – for the first week or two. After they get bored, dog care falls to you, Mom or Dad.

Second, I said **“well-matched.”** Key word here. If you have a baby or toddler, please, for the love of god, *do not get a puppy*. Raising a baby is a ton of work, right? The only difference in workload between babyhood and puppyhood is that puppyhood doesn't last as long. People who try to raise a puppy and a baby at the same time figure out pretty quickly that they're in over their heads. The situation usually ends badly for the dog.

Size matters. If your child is six years or younger, you probably shouldn't get a toy breed like a Chihuahua or Yorkie. Toy dogs are breakable. Young kids tend to break things. You don't want a dog that's too big, either; a rambunctious German shepherd or lab could unintentionally hurt a small child. **The best choice for a family with little kids is a young adult (2-5 years), medium-sized dog like a beagle, boxer, basset hound, mini poodle (but not a toy poodle), Bichon Frise or English cocker spaniel.**

Finally, no matter which dog you get, you have to make sure your kids understand how to interact with it. Kids are the perfect height for slobbery kisses – and also for

bites to the face. Before you bring a dog home, do lots of research on raising kids and dogs. Read about dog bite prevention and training techniques that kids can use. Teach kids how to safely greet, handle, and play with a dog.

“A playmate for my current dog.” Two dogs can be a lot of fun. It's a big decision, though: two dogs mean twice the work and twice the cost.

People often want to adopt a second dog because they work all day long and their current dog is lonely at home. This *can* work, but it usually just makes the problem worse. I mean, if you don't have time for one dog, what are you going to do with two? Dogs were bred to love and live with humans. As a result, most crave human companionship even more than canine companionship. Two dogs may end up sitting at home being bored and lonely together. If this is your sole reason for adding dog no. 2, you might want to save the money and hire a dog walker or invest in doggy daycare instead.

But what if you're one of us crazy dog people who feel that dogs are like potato chips and you could never have just one? Let's see. Do you have the time to spend walking, training and playing with each dog individually as

well as together? Can you afford to double your dog budget? Is your current dog good with other dogs? Are you prepared for the challenge and adventure of living with a pack? If yes, then I say go for it. You're crazy, but so am I.

Something to keep in mind: It's best to get a dog of the opposite sex of your current pup (just make sure they're both fixed!). A male and female pair tends to get along more harmoniously.

"A guard dog." This one's a bit iffy. It's okay to get a "guard dog" if:

- The dog will be an indoor or indoor/outdoor dog.
- You plan on including the dog as a member of your family.
- You plan on properly socializing and obedience training, just like you would with any pet dog.

A well-trained, well-socialized dog is the best protector. They bond closely with their family and learn to identify which situations are harmless and which are dangerous. They're less likely to attack your visiting grandmother. Good choices include: German shepherds, Rottweilers, Dobermans, Schnauzers, Belgian Malinois, and their

various mixes. These dogs are all naturally protective of their family without needing protection training. They have the added bonus of looking kind of intimidating, causing shady characters to think twice before attempting any shenanigans.

It is NOT okay to get a guard dog if:

- You plan on leaving your new dog in the backyard to prowl for bad guys.
- You want your dog to be mean, and therefore you don't want to properly socialize him.

I know you don't need me to tell you this, since you are a smart, wise 3LostDogs reader who wouldn't dream of such foolishness. But I'll say it anyway: An under-socialized dog like this is a walking, growling liability. It can be dangerous to anyone, including your own family. Seriously, buy a real security system instead.

"A gift for my spouse/mother/friend/child."

This depends. Are you including your giftee in the decision? Or are you thinking of surprising them with a furry bundle of joy? Don't. Just don't. You are setting yourself up for trouble. A dog is not a Wii. When the recipient gets bored or just doesn't connect with the dog,

you will be the one responsible for the care and training. Instead of a surprise gift, involve your giftee in the process. Discuss it with them, make sure everyone is on the same page, and let them pick their own dog.

“An exercise/fitness companion.” Exercise is much more fun with a furry friend (except, you know, if it’s a cat. Cats are not big fans of jogging). A dog can be a great motivator to get off your butt and get out the door. And they’ll be sure to let you know if you’ve missed a walk.

Get a dog that matches your energy level – for example, you don’t need a turbo-charged border collie if you just plan on going for regular walks. And lazy breeds like Mastiffs (yes, the giant breeds are giant couch potatoes) might get tired before you do. Brachycephalic (you know you’re a dog nerd when you spell “brachycephalic” correctly on the first attempt) dogs with the smushed-in faces like pugs, Boston terriers, and English bull dogs overheat quickly and therefore don’t make good running partners.

“A sports competitor.” Did you see an agility competition on TV or a Frisbee dog demo at the park? Decided it was really cool looking and wanted to give it a

shot? Awesome! It IS really fun. You’ve probably noticed that there are a lot of border collies and Australian shepherds involved in dog sports. Does that mean you have to run out and buy one of these “pro athlete” dogs? Nope! In fact, it’s probably overkill if you just want to try out the sport. So which is the right dog to start out in a dog sport?

The dog you can live with.

Breed doesn’t matter so much. Just get a dog you like. In case the sport doesn’t work out – you decide you don’t really like it, or if you or your dog get injured and can’t compete, you have to be prepared for your competition dog to become your pet dog.

When you go to the shelter, you’ll see lots of medium sized, athletic-looking mutts. These can be good starter dogs and all-around companions. Look for a dog who enjoys playing with you, and who likes to play with toys. These are indicators of a potential sports partner.

“A spoiled house pet or lapdog.” Just looking for a friend to keep you company around the house? No problem. Just remember that all dogs, even little tiny lapdogs, will need regular exercise, proper training and socialization.

Senior dogs are a great choice. Old grey-faced pooches make amazing, low energy pets. They're also harder to find homes for in shelters. So if you're willing to provide a "retirement home" for an older dog, I speak for all shelter workers when I say thank you, you rock!

As mentioned previously, the giant breeds are nice, lazy couch potatoes. Great Danes, mastiffs, wolfhounds or greyhounds are good choices. Greyhounds need a good run once in a while, but are otherwise content to spend their days watching TV with you. You probably won't find one at a shelter, though. The adoption process for rescued racing greyhounds is a bit more time-consuming, but definitely worth it.

Looking for a smaller dog? Chihuahuas are pretty versatile little guys. They're happy as lapdogs, taking long walks, or learning new tricks. Some other lapdog-types include French bulldogs, small spaniels, toy poodles, Maltese, or Shih Tzu.

"A faithful companion for all my adventures."

Looking forward to taking Fido on road trips? Hiking trips? Camping trips? Dogs were made for this kind of stuff. They love accompanying their people on all kinds of outings, whether it's a wilderness expedition or a drive

around town. I gotta admit, these adopters are my favorite adopters. High-energy people, looking forward to including their dog in everything they do. The most happy and fulfilled dogs I've met are the ones who belong to these folks.

If you're the weekend warrior type -that is, you lead a pretty normal suburbanite lifestyle and save all your adventures for one or two days a week- then the best dog is, like I mentioned earlier, the dog you like. Pick a dog who will match your usual lifestyle the best. "House pet" type dogs, like seniors or lazier large breeds, can be a good choice.

If you're really active and adventurous, a high-energy dog might be best. The working or herding breeds like Australian shepherds, huskies, border collies, pointers, hounds, pit bulls, or cattle dogs will be able to keep up with you. Make sure you get a dog who is well-suited to your climate. Go hiking in the sizzling hot deserts of the American Southwest? Northern breeds like huskies, malamutes or Samoyeds won't do so well. Neither will those smushed-face bull dogs or pugs. And if you spend a lot of time in very cold weather, thin-coated breeds are not the best option.

ASSESS YOUR LIFESTYLE

Now that you've thought about your reason for wanting a dog and maybe have a few breed types in mind, let's narrow the field further. Getting an accurate assessment of your lifestyle is crucial to picking the right dog.

What's your home like?

First question: what does your landlord or HOA say?

I know, it sucks to have to conform to someone else's idea of what an appropriate dog is. But you don't want to get the "wrong" dog and then have to keep her all hidden away. That will get old fast. So go and check if there are any restrictions in your rental agreement/neighborhood rules.

Done with that? Good. Moving on.

You live in....

An apartment. Small dogs are best for apartments, right? Actually, the size of the dog has very little to do with how well it will do in an apartment. Of course, your apartment complex may have restrictions on how large a dog can be. But if no such restrictions apply, then don't worry about size. Consider these factors instead:

Noise. Dogs who bark all the time are not good if you hope to avoid eviction. Spunky little dogs like Chihuahuas or Yorkshire terriers yap incessantly when they get bored. Beagles, hounds and huskies howl mournfully when you leave for work. When researching potential breeds, check and see if they're the noisemaking type.

Energy level. A bored dog in a small apartment is a recipe for disaster. Does that mean you can't have a smart, high-energy dog? Not necessarily. As long as you can provide plenty of exercise and mental stimulation, it's not a big deal. But if you're the couch-potato type or you're away from home a good chunk of each day, look for a lower energy (or older) dog.

A house. Homeowners/renters have more options than apartment dwellers, simply because they have more space and noisy dogs may be less of an issue.

Check out your backyard: is the fence secure? Are there any places where a small dog could escape? And if you get a big dog, is the fence tall enough? Some dogs are excellent fence jumpers. We get a ton of Siberian huskies at our shelter, because these dogs are talented escape artists. Siberians are known for their ability to scale six-foot fences.

Of course, you could avoid those issues by keeping Fido indoors most of the time. Backyards are overrated, anyhow. Don't think you're off the hook for canine exercise just because you have a huge yard. Do you know what most dogs do when left alone in huge backyards? They sit at the door and wait for their owners.

How much time do you have for a dog?

This is the big issue. Your dog will take up a lot of your time, especially in the beginning when he's getting situated. You'll spend a lot of time training, supervising and socializing to turn Fido into a well-mannered pet. After Fido gets settled in, time requirements will vary depending on his age, energy level and intelligence.

Puppies are the most demanding, requiring practically round-the-clock attention. So a two-month-old pup is out of the question if everyone in the household works or is at school for most of the day.

Exercise and mental stimulation

Most adult dogs require minimally 30-60 minutes of exercise per day. This means walks, fetch, or other active play. A high-energy dog will require a lot more.

"Mental stimulation" just means exercising the dog's brain. Obedience training, trick training and dog sports training are good ways to stretch your dog's mind. You can also play games like hide and seek. The herding and working breeds require the most exercise and mental stimulation of all. Expect to spend a good two hours a day working with your border collie, Australian shepherd or cattle dog.

Training and socialization

Puppies require the most work in these areas. If you adopt a well-behaved older dog, you won't have to do too much training or socialization. You'll find some "special needs" dogs at the shelter too. These are dogs who have developed fear or behavior problems due either to abuse or poor socialization. They'll take a lot of time and patience to "fix." I generally recommend that first-time dog owners don't adopt special needs dogs.

Hanging out

Your dog will need to spend some quality time with you when you're not doing anything in particular. Some dogs more than others. Dogs like labs, German shepherds, golden retrievers and pit bulls are very "clingy" and will want to spend every waking moment at your side.

Northern or Spitz-type dogs like huskies, malamutes, Akitas, and chows are more aloof and content to do their own thing.

How much dog can you afford?

This one's pretty straight-forward: the larger the dog, the more expensive the upkeep. A Great Pyrenees is gonna cost a hell of a lot more to feed than a Papillon. Large dogs also tend to have more health problems, so expect to spend more on vet care.

How much dog can you handle?

Now you have to figure out how much mental and physical work you can put into a dog. A few things to think about:

How much dog can you *literally* handle? You have to be able to physically control your dog. You need to be able to walk your dog down a busy street, full of distractions, and be 100% confident that Fido isn't going to pull you into traffic. Don't get a dog who weighs as much as you do.

How much training are you willing to do? Modern dog training techniques have pretty much turned the idea

that certain types of dogs are "stubborn" into a myth. "No such thing as a stubborn dog, just poor training" and all that. However, I will say that some dogs are definitely easier to train than others. Some dogs have a definite "Why should I? What's in it for me?" attitude. Akitas, chows, and huskies come to mind. They require more work to motivate.

Dogs who are ruled by their noses, like hounds, are easily distracted and therefore require more work on the trainer's part.

If you want an easy-to-train, eager-to-please dog, consider a pit bull, golden retriever, lab, Papillion, Doberman or German shepherd.

Are you willing to work on some minor behavior problems? Things like pulling on leash, jumping up and play biting are simple to fix but they do take time, patience and a savvy owner. If you don't want to deal with any behavior problems, get an older dog who's already trained.

How much intelligence can you handle? Border collies are very smart. Australian Shepherds are very smart. In fact, most of the herding breeds are VERY SMART. But is this a *good* thing? See, "smart" does not mean "smart

when the owner is ready to focus and train the dog.” It means these dogs are very clever. They’re very good at figuring things out. And they’re very good at getting what they want. They will learn bad behavior just as easily as good behavior. These dogs are not just high energy, they’re high brain power. They always need a “project:” something to do, some problem to solve. This could be training, dog sports practice, or simply playing with food-dispensing puzzle toys. If you don’t provide them with a project, they will find their own. And they always pick a project you won’t like: digging up the yard, destroying the couch cushions, herding the cat, etc.

How much HAIR can you handle? Most people assume that longhaired dogs shed a lot, but that isn’t true. The length of a dog’s hair has nothing to do with how much they shed. What you have to worry about is the *thickness* of the hair. Many dogs have “double coats,” meaning that they have a second, unseen layer of fur. At least twice a year, these dogs “blow their coats,” completely shedding the second layer. You would not believe the amount of hair that falls off during this process.

Double-coated breeds include German shepherds, all the northern breeds, Pomeranians, shelties, and more. **How do you know if a dog is double coated?** Ruffle your

fingers through her hair. Look at your hand. Is it covered in clingy soft fur that’s a lighter color than the outer coat? You’ve got yourself a double-coater.

Grooming: Longhaired dogs do require more brushing to prevent their hair from becoming matted. Some dogs with fancy coats, like Shih Tzu, will require regular trips to the groomer.

Non-shedding dogs: Most curly-haired dogs don’t shed much. They still need regular grooming to prevent mats.

RESEARCH, RESEARCH, RESEARCH!

So now you’ve done a lot of thinking. You have a pretty good idea of the canine qualities that will best fit with your family and lifestyle. Now you have to figure out which dogs possess those qualities.

Pick yer breed(s). Even if you plan on getting a mutt, don’t think that breed research doesn’t apply to you. Mixed breed dogs have many of the traits of the breed they look most like:

Mutts that look like golden retrievers or labs tend to be energetic, outgoing, people-loving dogs.

Scruffy little terrier-looking dogs tend to be feisty and driven like the Jack Russell or border terriers that they resemble.

You get the idea.

You don't need to have your heart set on a particular breed. But selecting a few breeds with the qualities you want will go a long way toward helping you choose the perfect dog.

I'm going to do two things here. First, I'll briefly describe the temperaments of some popular breeds. Then I'll introduce you to the breed groups. This is intended to be a starting point for your research. Pick a few breeds or groups that look interesting, and then go do more research. Read breed books. Use the almighty Google to find websites dedicated to the breed. Talk to people who own the breeds you're looking at. You can never be too prepared.

Just keep in mind that all breed standards are just guidelines and even purebreds may act outside of their breed description. Dogs are still individuals, after all.

Intro to twelve popular dog breeds

Golden retriever: Probably the most versatile of all dog breeds, Goldens are bubbly, intelligent, eager-to-please dogs. Great for older kids, these high-energy dogs are for active families who want to include the dog in everything they do. Take them camping, running, biking or swimming. They do well at sports like agility.

Pit bull: The **American Staffordshire terrier (Am Staff)** and the **American Pit Bull terrier (APBT)** are the exact same dog. It just depends on which kennel club you ask. The **Staffordshire bull terrier (Staffy)** is the exact same dog in miniature form. They are collectively known as "pit bulls." Pit bulls are happy-go-lucky clowns who live to please their people. Usually high energy and rambunctious, they would do best in an active family with kids ages 10 and up. They don't always get along with other dogs, so careful introductions with your current dog are crucial.

Labrador retriever: Labs come in chocolate, yellow, or black. Great exercise partners, adventure companions or sports competitors. Labs are typically friendly and tolerant of children and other dogs. They are active, high energy and unruly as youngsters; a young lab will test the

mettle of even the most patient owner. They do start to chill out around age 3-4, so if you're looking for a loyal house pet, consider an adult lab.

German shepherd: Loyal and protective of their families. They're herding dogs, so very smart and high energy. Very trainable and eager to learn new tricks. They can be very athletic, but the funky hind-leg structure of many purebred "show quality" shepherds can lead to hip dysplasia and other problems. Shelters are full of German shepherd/Labrador crosses. These crosses make excellent hiking companions and sports competitors without the hind leg issues.

Border collie: Border collies are high energy, high brain power, high intensity dogs. I could describe them to you, but it's best if you just watch [this video](#).

Bichon Frise: Bichons are known for their good-natured and gentle temperaments. They're very active and love to be the center of attention. A well-socialized Bichon makes a great choice for families with young kids - just supervise closely and make sure your child knows how to handle the dog gently. Need regular brushing and trimming.

Chihuahua: In my experience, Chihuahuas have a very wide range of personalities depending on how well they were socialized as pups. They can be spunky and outgoing, or fearful and defensive. Generally speaking, they're good all-around companion dogs. Even though they're "lap dogs" they still need plenty of exercise. Very breakable, so they're not for families with young kids.

Pug: Even-tempered, sturdy and adaptable, pugs make good traveling companions, lap dogs, or playmates for children ages 6 and up. As with all toy breeds, pugs are not a good match for younger kids or toddlers. Low to medium energy level. With their short noses, they overheat easily and don't do well with vigorous exercise or very hot climates.

Cavalier King Charles spaniel: These little dogs are pretty versatile. They can be lap dogs or adventure companions. Very trainable, patient and sweet-natured, they're good for first time owners and families with older kids. Their long hair requires at least weekly brushing.

Chow chow: They may seem kind of exotic, but chows and chow mixes are actually pretty common in shelters. Definitely not for first-time dog owners. These dogs can be impatient and a challenge to train. Reserved and not

as “eager to please” as a lot of dogs. They can be snippy with children, so they do best with families with teens or adults only. Moderate energy level. Their long, double coats need regular grooming.

Jack Russell terrier: Jack Russells are high-energy little spitfires who require an owner with a good sense of humor. Very intelligent and strong willed, they can be a bit of a challenge to train. They need lots of exercise and room to run, so not a great choice for apartment dwellers or low-energy families. May not do well with dogs. If you’re active, patient, and look forward to a challenge, JRT’s make great sports competitors. (Jack Russells are also known as “Parson Russells”)

Coonhound: They need plenty of exercise, but at home, coonhounds tend to be pretty laid-back and willing to hang out and just watch TV. They can get very loud, what with all the baying and howling, so definitely not an apartment dog. Good for active weekend-warrior types. Very low-maintenance coat. Keep in mind that they’re hunting dogs, so cat owners beware. Pretty good with other dogs.

Breed groups

Herding: Generally the most intelligent and high energy of all dogs. They absolutely require active owners who have lots of time to spend on exercise and training. Rock stars at agility, disc dog and other sports. They can make great family pets, but supervise closely around little kids: herding dogs herd, sometimes with teeth. Including: border collies, Australian shepherds, German shepherds, collies, Shetland sheepdogs, Australian cattle dogs/Queensland heelers, corgis, Belgian Malinois.

Working: Heavy-duty dogs bred for guarding, pulling sleds or rescue work. Very intelligent. These guys have a strong work ethic and always need a “job,” whether it be agility, trick training or lots of fetching. Naturally protective. Moderate to high energy, with the giant breeds lower on the energy scale. Including: boxers, Bernese Mountain Dogs, Rottweilers, Akitas, Alaskan Malamutes, Dobermans, mastiffs, Saint Bernards, Siberian huskies, Great Danes.

Toy: They make up for their diminutive size by being tough as nails; toy dogs have been known to put Dobermans and Great Danes in their place. Many make good apartment dogs, but they will yap up a storm if they

get bored. Require plenty of exercise just like the big dogs. Many make great agility dogs. Not for small children. Including the Chihuahua, Maltese, Papillon, Pomeranian, Yorkshire terrier, miniature pinscher, Cavalier King Charles spaniel.

Terrier: These are the dogs that try men's souls. High energy and strong-willed little hunters. Usually not too good with other animals. Be careful if you own critters like hamsters or Guinea pigs. Good for active folks with patience and a good sense of humor. Includes the Jack Russell, bull terrier, Cairn terrier (i.e. Toto from the Wizard of Oz), border terrier, mini Schnauzer, Scottie and Westie.

Sporting: Usually high-energy dogs, originally bred for hunting. Many love the water. Tend to be easy to train. These dogs need active families. Includes labs, golden retrievers and assorted other retrievers, pointers, spaniels, and setters.

Non-Sporting: This is basically the miscellaneous category. These dogs have a wide range of size and personality from the Dalmatian to the Lhasa Apso. This category includes most of the harder-to-train breeds like

the chow, Shiba Inu, and Shar-Pei. Also includes the very smart and trainable poodle.

Putting it all together

Once you've done your research, write down a list of possible breeds and a list of criteria for your perfect dog. Write down your preferences for:

- Age (young puppy? Older puppy? Adult? Senior?)
- Grooming requirements (curly haired, short hair, no double coat, etc.)
- Energy level
- The training challenges you're willing to work with (do you require a housetrained dog? Do you want a dog who already knows basic commands? Are you okay with a dog with some minor "issues?")

And anything else you can think of. Take this list with you to the shelter.

PART TWO: Finding your dog

BEFORE YOU GO TO THE SHELTER

The best time to start your search

You'll need to spend a lot of time with your dog to get him settled and start developing good habits right away. Try to arrange your dog hunting at the beginning of a weekend, or any time when you'll have a few days to spend with Fido.

Clear your schedule for the rest of the day when you begin your search. You want to be able to take as much time as you need to browse the shelter(s). Remember that you'll be spending up to fifteen years with this dog.

Keep expectations in check

Most people don't find "the one" the first time they go looking for a dog. It helps if you go into this with an "I'm just going to look" attitude. That way, you won't feel pressured to adopt one of the first dogs you see even if that dog doesn't completely mesh with you. It's okay to

come back in a week or check other shelters until you find your dog.

Should you bring your kids?

You definitely don't want to adopt a dog without having your children interact with it first. But adopters often get overwhelmed trying to wrangle overexcited children as they walk through the shelter. It can be hard to remain objective and take your time when your kids are running from kennel to kennel and pleading their cases for their favorites. It might be best to leave your young kids at home while you scout ahead. If you find a possible dog (or several), you can bring your kids back to meet them later.

But if your kids are fairly mature and you think they could handle the process well, by all means, bring them along. Just make sure to talk about what to expect (you probably won't find a dog on the first visit), and lay down some rules (no petting dogs without permission, no sticking fingers in kennels, etc).

Should you bring your dog?

Some shelters will allow you to walk your own dog through the kennels while you browse. **Don't do it!** Walking through a building with endless rows of frantic, barking dogs is not a nice experience for any dog. It'll put him on the defensive and/or completely freak him out. Any dog-to-dog introductions you attempt after this will probably not go well. If you find a dog you like, you can bring your current dog back later for an intro.

The best option is to bring someone with you - your spouse (who should come with you anyway), a friend, etc. Have this person wait outside with your dog so that if you find a dog you like, you can do dog intros right away.

What to bring:

- Your breed notes and criteria
- Your list of questions to ask the shelter staff (described below)
- A notepad and pen
- A dog toy or two

-A leash or a carrying kennel (the shelter will probably provide a temporary leash, but it's always a good idea to bring your own)

-Driver's license or other form of ID

AT THE SHELTER

Walking into a shelter full of "lost dogs" isn't easy - you'll want to take them all home! With a little bit of strategic planning, you can make your shelter visit an enjoyable experience. The best shelter strategy I've found is as follows:

The walkthrough

First, walk the entire shelter, making sure to see *all* of the adoptable dogs. Read kennel tags to see if there are any behavior and temperament notes. When you see a dog who looks interesting, crouch down next to the kennel and offer your hand. Generally speaking, the dogs who are best suited for inexperienced owners or young families will come to greet you and lick your fingers, tail wagging.

Just keep in mind that the way a dog acts in her kennel may be misleading. Being stuck in a shelter kennel is a miserable thing for a dog. Naturally, their behavior will be a little abnormal. Some dogs may bounce off the walls, go crazy or act fearful in the kennels. But once they get a chance to get away from the stress, they'll be perfectly friendly and nice. Other dogs will totally fawn over you when you interact with them through the kennel bars, and then act like you don't exist once you take them out. So don't fall in love with or rule out a dog based on how she acts in her kennel.

When you find a possible candidate for adoption, take note of her location (if there's a number on the kennel, write it down), and move on to explore the rest of the shelter. Talk to staff or volunteers. Explain what you're looking for and ask questions about the dogs' personalities. The crews at the good shelters love it when adopters do their homework, and they'll be happy to answer your questions.

Once you have a few possible dogs in mind, **ask a staff member to take one out to a meet and greet area.**

Getting to know your candidates

Meet and greet. Once you have the dog out in a play yard or quiet room, you may need to give her a moment to adjust. She's been locked up in a cramped and noisy kennel for a while, so she'll need to stretch her legs, explore, or take a bathroom break.

Kneel down and call her to you. Don't crowd her. She may cling to the shelter worker at first. That's okay. She should soon come up to investigate you. Pet her gently on her side or neck - don't pet her on the top of the head until she's more comfortable. It helps if, before you visit the shelter, you take some time to learn about canine body language. Look for a dog who is interested and eager to interact with you: sniffing your clothes, leaning against you, standing close for petting.

With the staffer's permission, **offer the dog a toy.** Bounce it, squeak it, drag it across the floor. Some dogs will be too distracted to play with toys, and that's okay. But dogs who show interest in toys are often easier to train and make great candidates for dog sports. If she'll play with the toy, let her take it and then see how she reacts when you try to take it away (if you're not comfortable doing this, ask the staff member). She should willingly give it up

and show no signs of possessiveness. Possessiveness is something that can be corrected with training, but that's best left to experienced dog people.

Once you've been nice and polite and given the dog a chance to warm up to you, it's time to get a little "rude." Gently grab her ears, tail and paws. Stand and lean slightly over her. Some dogs will be uncomfortable with this. The best family dogs will not mind at all.

If you have kids, supervise their interactions closely. The child should be comfortable with the dog, and the dog should enjoy their company. Actually, the best dogs should *prefer* playing with children over adults. Beware of dogs who shy away from or completely ignore your kids.

Ask if it's okay to walk the dog around the shelter to see how her leash manners are. Most dogs, especially young ones, will be completely overstimulated and pull on leash. But I do find quite a few gems who will walk nicely and attentively by your side. These dogs are usually older and have had some training. Such dogs are a great choice for inexperienced or lower energy people.

See how she reacts to passing people or dogs. She may want to rush over to greet them, which is okay. If she

lunges, growls, or raises her hackles, watch out. These are indicators of serious behavior issues.

If you already have a dog, **you will want to arrange a dog-to-dog meet and greet.** The staff should be trained to properly introduce dogs to each other. If it doesn't work out with a particular dog, they may have suggestions for different dogs to try.

Talk to the staff member/volunteer and ask lots of questions. The level of familiarity that the staff will have with each dog varies shelter to shelter. At the large county "pound" where I currently work, hundreds of dogs come in and out every week. Everyone works to provide them with the best care and attention possible, but it's difficult to get to know individual dogs well. I used to volunteer at a shelter that was much smaller. Every staff member knew every dog's name, and was familiar with each dog's personality and history. So it depends on the shelter. Just don't be afraid to ask questions. Like I said, at the good shelters, staff will be happy to work with you.

On a similar note, **don't rush through a meet and greet for the staff member's sake.** Adopters often apologize profusely for "taking up my time." I reassure them that they should take all the time they need. This is a huge

decision, so don't let anyone rush you. If the staffer seems impatient, annoyed or hurried, you might want to come back when it's less busy. Or maybe try a friendlier shelter.

Some questions to ask:

How long has the dog been at the shelter?

Why is the dog at the shelter? Was she a stray? An owner surrender?

If the dog was surrendered by owner, what was the reason given? (Just know that people sometimes lie about the reason they're giving up their pet)

Has the dog been temperament tested? How is she with dogs/kids/cats?

Is she housetrained?

Does she have any known behavior problems?

How is her health? Has she been spayed? Is she current on her shots?

Has she been microchipped, and if not, can you do that at the shelter? (I strongly suggest getting a microchip. It's

your best shot at getting your dog back if she ever gets lost)

Making the choice

You want to find a dog who fits your criteria and gets along well with your family. It should be a dog that you really like and that you really connect with. When you find the right dog, you'll know it. There's always a strong connection; a feeling that "this is my dog." If you have doubts, you should go home, sleep on it, and make a decision later. It's also okay to walk away completely. Remember that it may take several days, weeks or months before you find the dog that's perfect for you.

When you find The One

So you've finally found the right dog. Woohoo! Now, it's time to fill out your paperwork and pay the adoption fee. Every reputable shelter will require their animals to be spayed or neutered before going to their new homes. If your dog has already been fixed, you should be able to take her home that day. If not, she may have to stay a couple days to have the surgery done. Before taking her home, ask about what vaccinations she's had so you can continue the proper vaccination protocol with your own vet. Ask about what food she's been eating. You'll want

to feed her the same food or similar for at least a couple weeks, to avoid causing stomach upsets.

After that, it's time to go home! It's a very exciting feeling, starting life with a new dog. The journey is always unique with each dog, and always an adventure. With hard work, patience, and a healthy dose of humor and understanding, your adventure will be a rewarding one.

Have fun!

P.S. Now that you've picked your dog, what do you do next? At 3LostDogs.com, we're working on a detailed new guide about what to do when Fido comes home. It will walk you through the rocky first few weeks of dog ownership and help you build an amazing relationship with your new companion. Available in March 2014. If you're on the 3LostDogs [email list](#), **you'll get a discount and be among the first to receive project updates.** Stay tuned!

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