

Is The Average Adoption for the Average Person?

Many have seen that famous Sarah McLachlan BC SPCA commercial, her song “Angel” playing over videos of the sweetest and saddest looking pets, or others like it, urging any viewer with a heart to help them. While making a charitable donation is always an option, most commercials are focused on getting people to adopt when in the market for a new furry companion, rather than buy. The assertion that adoption can be a substitute for buying a pet from a breeder seems to brush over the fact that shelter animals are often harder to take care of. Most people are already turned off from adoption as they may have to provide therapy to their potentially traumatized shelter dog in addition to the normal responsibilities new pet owners face. Not everyone can be expected to have the capabilities to give most shelter dogs what they need. For example, a shelter dog who may have a fear of loud noises may not be the best fit for a couple with a newborn baby. There is also the question of risk and safety for many potential dog owners, as gambling on an untrained 9-year-old pit bull may not be desirable for a family with two young children. At the end of the day, the idea that everyone interested in becoming a dog owner should adopt is nice, but it may not be feasible, and for many, it might be easier to buy a purebred Goldendoodle rather than a shelter dog with unknown baggage.

Many animal foundations that facilitate adoptions recognize the need to assess the potential homes for their dogs to ensure a proper fit. Donna Darrell, the founder of Pound Hounds ResQ, spoke about their “long and difficult adoption process by design” and the fact that “if it’s not the right home, you’re setting up that dog for failure” [Greenwood]. Even organizations with open adoption policies, which operate under the assumption that most people will take care of their dog, still ensure that possible owners have accurate information

about a dog's temperament before deciding to adopt. When those already on the fence about the usual responsibilities that come with getting a dog finally decide to do so, they prefer the process to be enjoyable, and adoption agencies can take a while to evaluate and process requests, with no guarantee they will be approved. Where adoption agencies often take the time to vet potential owners for specific animals through either of these processes, there is another "easier" option for those wishing to avoid the scrutiny: animal shelters. Shelters differ from adoption agencies or foundations in that they deal with a larger quantity of homeless pets, as their main priority is to avoid the euthanasia of their animals through an adoption process as simple as giving an animal to a person with interest. Due to the larger volume of animals in their care, shelter employees rarely have as accurate a sense of their dogs' personalities as foundations, and for many potential owners, their choice can be a blind adoption based only on a quick interaction through a cage. Not to mention a shelter is not exactly the most calming experience for the dogs, who often bark to no end and scare off potential families. So while a shelter may provide quicker access to adoptions, many are not comfortable sacrificing a guaranteed personality fit and history for their new potential canine.

It is at this point that many people tend to look away from shelters and adoption organizations and towards their wallets, as the majority of pet owners weigh the pros and cons of spending hundreds to thousands of dollars for a purebred dog from a pet store or breeder, but even these sources may not mitigate as many problems as people assume. For those who have not frequented the websites of animal organizations such as the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), the origin stories for dogs in the windows of pet stores may still be a mystery. It is possible, and even likely, that the purebred French bulldog

puppy playing in a pet store has come from a puppy mill, the likes of which the ASPCA has made it a point to fight. Their president and CEO, Matt Bershader, describes the animals born in puppy mills as ones “usually removed from their mothers at six weeks of age, denying them critical socialization with their mothers and littermates. The mothers, meanwhile, have little to no recovery time between bearing litters” [Bershader]. The lack of socialization and poor conditions of puppy mills often lead to both behavioral and physical health problems in puppies later sold to stores and finally to their patrons, two fears many have regarding shelter animals. While puppy mills may offer purebreds at a more reasonable price point, the morality is clearly in question, as many mills treat their puppies as one may treat a product ready to be shipped, packing many into small crates. When their mothers can no longer produce more inventory for the mill owners, they are often left to starve to death, or if the mill operators are feeling generous, shot. Thankfully, there is still another option for starting life as a dog owner, but it is far from being budget-friendly.

To resolve the aforementioned concerns, people may turn to reputable breeders who raise specific types of dogs, usually on large properties with yards to run and ample care to become healthy members of a new family, but this avenue raises a new concern, as the service comes at a hefty price. The first step of this process is finding a reputable breeder for a specific breed; many breeders specialize in only one breed. Through some quick research, many people will realize that certain breeds are not available in their state. For example, a person in St. Louis, MO who is looking for the popular golden retriever breed will have to drive more than 150 miles to meet their closest breeder according to gooddog.com, a website that connects people to breeders for all types of dogs across the country. When they get there, assuming the

breeder has dogs for them, they should expect to pay “\$500 for a dog from a backyard breeder or a pet store to upwards of \$3,000 for a show quality pup from a top breeder” according to an article from Forbes written in 2012 [St. John]. The smarter pet owner would spring for the \$3,000 golden, since “if a \$900 puppy mill dog ends up with hip dysplasia or a heart condition or a thyroid condition, you could easily swallow that \$1,100 difference in a single vet visit, and still have a dog with a shortened life, or a compromised quality of life” [St. John]. But there has to be a better way to get dogs in the hands of those who will care for them unless dogs are simply meant only for the wealthy or immoral.

The financial issues many may face when thinking of going the reputable breeder route are daunting, but some people may not have the choice. For many, the breed of the dog may be one of the paramount concerns, as some breeds offer specific benefits. Certain hypoallergenic breeds make it possible to bring a best friend into the life of someone with allergies to most standard breeds, where others may be looking for a dog that can do more than wag its tail. Certain breeds are preferable for farms, as dogs are put to work rounding up livestock; border collies have more skills in this area than the common Labrador. Some may want a guard dog, and a Chihuahua cannot be expected to do the job as well as a Rottweiler. Outside of those with specific needs, most people might hesitate before dropping thousands of dollars on a dog simply because they have a preference for how the breed may look. Should the breed even matter for the average pet owner? At the end of the day, most dog owners end up enjoying their dog’s temperament and personality above all else. They tell stories about showing up and having a connection with the dog they end up choosing; maybe he immediately came over and sat on their lap, or she yawned in such a cute way that the family knew she had

to be theirs. Even at a breeder's farm, amongst fifteen identical Labrador puppies, most people still have a preference over which they take home.

It is widely regarded that, even in dog breeds considered to be the most palatable for domesticated family life, a great deal of training is needed at the early stage of a dog's life to ensure that their temperament is to their owner's liking. When police officers train their dogs, "one of the most important methods used in the training is to start the dogs off young. This goes for any dog training, actually" [Westling]. It is this training phenomenon amongst dogs that leads people to prefer purchasing them at a young age, rather than adopting a dog from a shelter who may be older. But training capability transcends a dog's breed in many instances, like German shepherds that, while stigmatized as aggressive and dangerous when seen in shelters, are one of "seven different large dog breeds that are specifically trained in police agencies" [Westling]. At shelters, many dogs are over the age of one, and their most effective period to be trained is thought to be past them. Most see this older age as evidence of increased risk with whether or not the dog can be properly trained and ultimately be pleasant to own. But in the case of the German shepherd police dog, age and temperament prove to be the important factors when assessing a dog's ability to one day be that family friend, rather than a breed, as these apex dogs can be taught to flawlessly perform delicate police work. It is the same reason a properly trained pit bull can befriend a cat, which leads to countless viral YouTube videos about their adorable relationship.

All factors considered the majority of people who simply have an aesthetic preference for a specific dog breed may be able to reconcile the decision between shelter dog risk and breeder expense in a way that gives them the best of both worlds: adopting a puppy. It is

extremely common for shelters and animal foundations to have puppies available, as owners of illegally fertile dogs often abandon unexpected litters of newborns on an unsettlingly regular basis. These puppies provide an opportunity to charitably and cost-effectively become a pet owner, as shelter dogs can be adopted for as little as the price to get them the proper shots, usually a fraction of the cost from pet shops and breeders. Even if affording the breeders' price tag is of no concern, it still might be worth considering the shelter puppy, as it is only a matter of time before the breeder's puppy finds a nice home. Shelter puppies, however, have a yearlong window in which they have the potential to become as great a companion as those from a more fortunate background. Before long they become old enough to be affected by the traumatizing conditions of the shelter lifestyle, as their trainability and general mental state decrease with each birthday.

Owning a dog is a unique experience, and for many dog owners forming the bond with their new pet is the most enjoyable part of the relationship. Some may let their dog up on the couch with them, or in their bed, while others give their dogs a space of their own. Many enjoy the pureness of the loyalty unique to the relationship between human and canine. Whatever the reason for deciding to add a dog's presence to the household, starting with a puppy allows owners to have a blank slate on which to begin setting the tone for the relationship. Where many become hesitant to choose a dog is when their blank slate has been marred with past experiences that may affect how the dog will be able to develop these relationships. The unknown challenge of gaining a shelter dog's trust is not for everyone, and people should not feel the need to take that on if they are not ready and willing to do so. Instead, those who would rather start with this blank slate should consider the shelter puppy, one who is as ready

and willing to begin this new relationship as any other puppy but only has a one-year window in which to do so. These shelter puppies need not be passed over but rather given the little bit of extra compassion and charity, so they too have the opportunity to be loved.

Audience Consideration

I am addressing an audience that may see the merit in helping animals in need, but when adopting a dog their primary focus is on companionship and ease, as they want an animal who can be a new addition to the family but won't cause problems. This audience sees safety as a concern, as they aren't sold that a dog from a shelter will be the same as one from a breeder. They know that shelter dogs are more likely to have either physical or mental health issues due to years spent either on the street or in the shelter itself. This audience also may not desire specific breeds of many dogs found in shelters, as pit bulls and German Shepherds are thought to have a propensity to be more aggressive and dangerous than a dog like a Labrador retriever. Members of this audience may also have kids or other animals like cats and need to pick a breed that has a known track record to be safe around them. They may not want to gamble on the uncertainty of a shelter animal when safety is a concern. They feel that they should not have to take on the issue of animal homelessness when finding a canine companion since giving any animal a good home is morally justified enough.

Works Cited

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