

Support for Open Adoptions

We all want animals to go to the best homes possible. Research shows that many of our fears about adopters turn out to be unfounded. What should our criteria be for deciding what's a "good enough" home?

At animal shelters, in our role as animal caregivers, we naturally feel protective as we try to make sense of external forces beyond our control. Many times we are inclined to create a sense of safety and security in our adoption programs by searching for homes that meet our highest hopes for "a great home." Then we worry because there seem to never be enough of them.

But let us think a little about what defines a "good enough" home? Could we be missing out on "good enough homes" by setting strict criteria for greatness? In our search for greatness do we make the actual adoption process so difficult that "good enough" and "great" people go somewhere else?

Great homes may be hard to find (or identify) and while we are looking for them a lot of really good, lifesaving opportunities are probably missed. Missing an opportunity to save lives does not make anyone safe. Lifesaving is a time when we should not let perfect get in the way of good. Our inclinations to keep animals safe inhibit our adoption potential, our ability to build relationships, and ultimately our ability to save lives, so we should look carefully at what is actually happening.

Five Essentials of a Successful Adoption

In 2003, Petsmart Charities held the Adoption Forum II and came up with the Five Essentials of a Successful Adoption:

1. The match would be suited to the individual animal and family
2. The pet would be afforded appropriate veterinary care
3. The pet's social, behavioral and companionship needs would be met
4. The pet would have a livable environment (including appropriate food, water, shelter, etc.)
5. The pet would be respected and valued

The full report can be viewed at
http://aspcapro.org/sites/default/files/adoption-forum_0.pdf

Making it an on-going conversation

Ideally, an adoption is a time for conversation. It is a time to exchange information and help make the best match possible for the people and the pet. Part of that process is trusting that many people may know what pet is best for them better than we do. Using open ended questions allows the agency to get to know the adopter in a respectful, non-judgmental way and leads to better customer service and public perception. It also leads to successful adoptions.

Ongoing relationships are built on these interactions. The conversations do not need to end when the pet goes home.

Support for new adopters is an integral part of building and maintaining the human/animal bond. Set up each adoption for success by providing adopters with accurate, helpful information about pet care and management. Follow up with a phone call or e-mail to check in that both the adopter and the pet are happy and thriving in the new relationship. Volunteers can be trained to do this job if a shelter is unable to provide staff to perform this service.

Letting adoptions happen

So how can we battle our natural inclinations toward protectionism in order to let trust and adoptions happen? It turns out that by rethinking our Inclinations for security, we can open up opportunities that lead to more positive outcomes and greater safety through Open Adoptions.

Below are a few examples of rethinking the inclinations that might cause us to miss life-saving opportunities.

Inclination 1 - Screening (or setting barriers) for adoption finds better homes for pets

Any barrier placed between an adopter and a pet should increase the animal's overall chance for survival/successful adoption more than not having the barrier. When we set these policies we should also consider the impact on other animals too due to space considerations, health, etc. We must realize that

for better or worse, one of the many things beyond a shelter's control is *whether people get pets*. In most communities there are many pets available at low or no cost, without a long trip to the shelter, a wait in line, interrogation (however well intended) and paperwork required.

We need to respond to this reality by removing obstacles for people to adopt shelter pets who are spay/neutered, vaccinated and micro-chipped. When there are concerns about a particular adopter or adoption match, it should be handled as a unique incidence and not as a general barrier. Matching up pets and adopters in friendly and open ways breaks through barriers to help animals find good homes, builds sound relationships in your community and starts to saturate homes with altered, vaccinated and micro-chipped animals.

Animal Farm Foundation has some [great resources on adoption conversations and matching](#) and [removing barriers to adoption](#) is one of the five key initiatives of the [Million Cat Challenge](#).

Inclination 2 - Impulses cannot be good adoptions

Planning and researching prior to adoption may be what some people need to do to prepare themselves for bringing home a new family member. For others, a spontaneous move could be just the thing that works for them.

Planning can lead to expectations. If the expectations are not met, this can lead to disappointment and possibly a failed relationship. While it is true that impulses can also lead to unexpected outcomes, the bottom line is that a successful (or unsuccessful) adoption has many complex reasons for being just that; planned or impulse is only part of the equation. Invest in building trusting relationships rather than denying adoptions based on pre-set criteria.

The ASPCA looked at [planned vs. spontaneous adoptions](#) and found that impulsiveness was not a factor in determining the success of an animal staying in their new home.

Here's a wonderful example of a shelter (and enterprising foster parent) "letting" impulse adoptions happen:

"I recently learned that the LA SPCA is having an interesting problem of *not* being able to give one of their foster parents

enough dogs. Every time they give her one, she is on the phone with them a few days later asking for another because she got the last one adopted! How? She is really using the idea of impulse to the nth degree. She owns a beauty parlor and she asks her clients to hold her foster dog while they are getting their hair done. 45 minutes later, they have a new hairstyle and a new dog. They did not walk into the salon with the idea of wanting a new dog... but guess what?"

Please see ASPCApro to learn more about [adoption ambassador programs](#).

Let's look at the next two as a bonded pair:

Inclination 3 - If a person does not pay an adoption fee, they cannot afford to take care of their new pet either

Inclination 4 - Adopting out pets for free makes them less valued

Recent studies have shown that these inclinations are simply not true. Many 'free cat' and 'name your own price' adoption promotions have been extremely successful and shelters who have utilized these adoption promotions have not seen an increase in adoption return rates. They have however experienced an increase in adoptions! One shelter, the Humane Society of Tacoma & Pierce County, found their name your own price promotion so successful that now all their cat adoptions are handled that way.

Here are some helpful resources on the subject:

- Maddie's Fund - [The Truth About Free Cat Adoptions](#)
- Emily Weiss - [A comparison of attachment levels of adopters of cats: fee--based adoptions versus free adoptions](#)
- The Maddie's Shelter Medicine Program at the University of FL - [A review of their study on free pet adoptions](#)
- Animal Sheltering magazine - [Free to Good Home](#) article

Inclination 5 - Adopting to households with kids will lead to more returns and bite cases

Many children grow up with dogs and cats. In fact pets are a common denominator in children's homes -- 67.7% of homes with children < age 6 and 74.6% of homes with children > age 6 live with dogs (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2007).

The relationships between kids and their pets can be invaluable. It is our duty as animal shelter/rescue staff to help nurture these relationships and provide support for families to have successful relationships with their pets.

Dogs and cats not only provide a family with love and constant companionship - they could also have a powerful effect on the health of children early in life, according to a small new study. [Research in the journal *Pediatrics*](#) shows that children who live in a home with a pet during their first year of life are also more likely to be healthier, compared with kids who do not live in a pet--owning household.

The ASPCA has some resources for shelters regarding dog adoptions and kids:

- [Must love dogs...what about kids?](#)
- [Saying 'yes' to kids and dogs](#)

Parents should know and understand dog body language to keep kids safe; simply planning to supervise is not enough to keep dogs and kids safe. Shelters can help support families with pets by providing [information](#) on how to read body language and help animals have lifelong homes with families.

Inclination 6 - Setting variable age restrictions on dogs is a productive and effective way to find good homes

Just as all dogs are individuals, all children are individuals too. Thus setting a definitive, rigid age restriction, such as no children under a certain age (i.e. 6 years, 8 years, 12 years, etc.), is arbitrary. No data or research exists to show that age restrictions lead to less bites and safer homes nor provide guidelines on how to set such age restrictions. Again, a conversation between the shelter and the adopter will help to achieve successful adoptions where both the pet and the family are safe.

Animal Farm Foundation has great resources on how to [build safe communities for everyone](#).

Inclination 7 - An adoption return is a failure and is stressful on the pet

People return animals for many reasons. A return does not mean that there is something inherently wrong with the pet or with the adopter. The most important aspect of a return is to learn as much as you can about both the adopter and the pet to help make a better match in the future. It allows the shelter to find out more about the pet's behavior in a home, their likes and dislikes, how they interact with children and other animals, etc. Also, find out what the adopter's expectations were and if they were not met by this pet. There may be another pet in the shelter who could better meet his or her expectations.

Bert Troughton with the ASPCA takes another look at [adoption returns](#) and how we should think about them.

Inclination 8 - Pit Bull/Bully Breed adoptions need the most restrictions

Shelters often require a more stringent process (home visits, landlord checks, 6 foot fences, dog to dog introductions, required training classes, etc.) for dogs who appear to be pit bull type dogs. What would happen if shelters took the approach that 'All dogs are individuals and need a chance to shine' instead of lumping them all into one group?

Research has found that it is impossible to breed label and predict behavior based solely on a dog's appearance. Ideally, we would describe dogs based on their behavior and let their appearance speak for itself.

Dogs identified as pit bull dogs are also discriminated against in the community, by rental properties, insurance companies and in some areas in the community as a whole which also makes them harder to adopt. Let's not perpetuate that in our shelters too. Provide adopters with resources for "pit bull" friendly landlords, insurance companies and how breed specific legislation does not create safer communities. Stress responsible pet ownership for ALL animals and how new adopters can accomplish this.

Animal Farm Foundation has some [wonderful resources](#) on support for adopters of "pit bull" type dogs.

The ASPCA has also found that there are many adopters out there looking for dogs that are identified as pit bull dogs and thus we need to [create adoption programs](#) to let people adopt them.

Inclination 9 - Dog to dog interactions are necessary prior to adoption

The shelter environment is a stressful place for many dogs. It can be difficult to get an authentic "read" on the dog's behavior. Recent research suggests that behavior in a shelter may not be predictive of the way animals will behave in a home. Instead, consider providing adopters with step-by-step instructions on how to facilitate pet-to-pet introductions after the adoption.

Include how to set the stage for a positive first interaction, explain how it is a process not a one-time event.

Some shelters even offer adopters a free private training session if they need help and have a behavior helpline available. Yes, sometimes people may completely dismiss the instructions and put the animals together right away. Most often, there are no problems but sometimes if there are, provide help to get them through it or provide the option to return the dog.

The ASPCA provides further insight into [dog to dog meet and greets](#) at the shelter.

Did it work? How will you know?

Determining HOW to measure success in your adoption program is just as important as having a successful adoption program.

Think about what you could put into place to measure the success of a new approach to adoptions.

- Number of adoptions – end goal, major metric
- Time to adoption – key to helping more animals
- Increase or decrease in returns
- Diversity of adopters – GIS – overlaid economic levels/zip code of adopters – are there any zip codes that are being left out?
- Diversity of animals adopted
- Perception of shelter by community
- Number of adoption denials

Bottom Line

A shelter can do a behavioral evaluation, work with an animal on training and behavior modification, and even put the animal into a foster home to see how things go. But the truth is we never know exactly how well an animal will fit into their new family, until we give that family and that animal a chance to try out a relationship. So give adopters the chance to provide a 'good enough home' and support them to help keep the family and the pet living together happily.

Additional Resources

Maddie's Fund - [Removing Barriers to Adoption](#): how evidence, innovation and compassion grow pet adoptions

HSUS - [Adopters Welcome](#)

Animal Sheltering Magazine - [The third degree](#) and [What I learned when I re-evaluated our adoption policies](#).