

EDCAS Volunteer Training Adoption Counseling

As adoption counselors, our job is to match people with dogs, and to point adopters toward resources to help make adoptions that stick. Using appropriate communication techniques we can gather information we need, and use that information to educate and assist adopters in choosing the right dog for their family and lifestyle.

For a thorough guide to creating a successful adoption experience see *Richmond SPCA's Guide to Create a Successful Adoption Experience* in the Volunteer Resource Center. The following sections "The Adoption Process" and "What is a Successful Adoption?" are borrowed from the Richmond SPCA's guide.

The Adoption Process:

- Is respectful of the adopter's experience and knowledge and assume both of you come from a place of commonality wanting to help animals
- Takes a conversational approach with open-ended questions such as "What are you looking for", "What's your lifestyle", etc.
- Is a discussion, rather than a series of barriers that applicants must overcome in order to get an animal Focuses on success, and creating a relationship with the customer
- **Looks for a way to approve an adoption, not turn one down**
- **Treats each potential adopter and animal as individuals**
- Uses guidelines to encourage discussion and education, not as inflexible mandates
- Emphasizes the resources the shelter can provide to help solve any problems that arise
- Emphasizes that post-adoption contact from the adopter is welcomed and returns are acceptable

What is a Successful Adoption?

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

Suggested Questions/Areas to Probe

The questions below are a starting point and are not in any particular order, and they may not all apply in every case. Use open-ended questions vs. yes/no questions. For example, ask "what sort of experience do you have with this breed type?" vs "do you have experience with Huskies?". The conversation will hopefully flow naturally so it doesn't feel like an inquisition to the potential adopter.

Tip: Keep the list in your pocket, but don't pull it out to begin the conversation. Wait until you feel like

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the conversation is winding down, then pull out the list and say something like “I just want to make sure I’m covering all the bases so you have all the information you’ll need to make a decision”.

1. Who lives in the home where the dog will live?
 - a. Kids – ages?
 - b. Any seniors? Active & mobile (or frail/fear of falling)?
2. Who else will have regular contact with the dog (pet sitter, housekeeper, etc)?
 - a. Grandkids – ages?
3. Everyone in the household on board with adopting a new dog?
4. Anyone have allergies or asthma?
5. Who will be the primary caretaker?
 - a. “Children” cannot be primary caretakers
6. What type of dwelling do you live in?
 - a. Single-family home
 - b. Apartment/condo
7. Suburban, Urban, Rural?
8. Type of yard?
 - a. Fencing?
 - b. Pool or water feature?
9. Own or rent?
10. What’s your experience owning dogs?
11. Where will your dog sleep?
12. Other pets in the home? *“Resident dog gets to make the decision.”* (Keep in mind that the two primary reasons dogs get into conflict are *conflict over resources* and *conflict over violations of personal space*.)
 - a. How old is your current dog? How is his/her health?
 - b. Has your current dog ever lived with another dog?
 - i. If so, how did they get along? (Trying to get at whether current dog may be a resource guarder or have personal space issues that may make it difficult to bring in a new dog).
 - c. What kind of experience does your current dog have meeting *new* dogs?
13. How long will your dog be left alone?
14. What type of exercise and mental enrichment do you plan to provide?
 - a. A “big yard” needs more probing; suggest “sniffaris”, mental enrichment
15. For dogs that may require extra veterinary care (injuries, allergies, etc): Are you able to provide for this dog’s veterinary care, which goes beyond the basics?
16. What drew you to this particular dog?
 - a. Probe on lifestyle (active, not active, travel a lot, etc)

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17. For people not intent on one specific dog:
 - a. Do you have a preferred gender?
 - b. Do you have a preferred age?
18. Are there any behaviors that are unacceptable to you?
19. What sort of training do you plan to do?
 - a. Make suggestions based on what you've observed in the dog

Unsure About a Potential Adopter?

There will be situations where you aren't comfortable with what you've learned by talking with a potential adopter or what you've observed in their behavior, or what you're observing in the dog's behavior around them.

It is important to stop the meet-and-greet if you aren't comfortable. Radio a staff member to intervene if you're not sure how to handle the situation. You can always say something like "I'll need to have a staff person join us" as if it's policy.

Some typical "red flags"

- Dog not "into" children - If children are present, the ideal dog will be interested in the children immediately and will show socially affiliative behaviors toward children (e.g. seeking attention from them, soft wiggly body language). Such a dog won't over-react to children's running, yelling, squealing (children should be asked to 'perform' these types of typical behaviors in the meet-and-greet).
- Children not listening to you and/or their parents about proper behavior with the dog
- Rough handling from the potential adopter
- Adopter interested in a shy/fearful dog but not listening to your instructions on how to approach/interact
- Dog obviously avoids the people - this can be hard to discern if the dog is distracted by the volunteer it may have a relationship with. Hand over some tasty treats and see if the dog will interact with the potential adopter for food. Dogs have to build relationships through trust, so you're not always going to see a love connection right away.

Note: sometimes what seems like a "red flag" turns out to be fine. Spend more time in the meet-and-greet if you're unsure, and if the potential adopter is willing (and you think they may be a good candidate for a different dog), bring out another dog to observe with them. You can always say something like "We're trying to learn more about another dog in our care, would you mind meeting him? It would really help us out."

Bringing Home a New Dog

The 3/3/3 handout (***Do's & Don'ts for the First 3 Days/3 Weeks/3 Months with Your New Dog*** located in the Volunteer Resource Center) is a resource for adopters, although you may wish to also give it to people who came in but didn't adopt a dog that day. Explain that it will help them prepare in advance for when they *do* adopt a dog.

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Preventing dogs from fleeing

Explain to adopters that a dog's stress hormones can stay elevated for 72 hours *simply due to a change in environment*, even for the most happy-go-lucky dog. While going from the shelter to their forever home is the most exciting day ever for a shelter dog, the dog doesn't know that or think of it like we do. It's very common for dogs to instinctively want to flee a new environment, which results in dogs getting lost, injured, and even killed.

In the car

- Ideally, adopters will be ready with an appropriately sized crate in their vehicle. Realistically, this is rare, so make sure to mention that it's not uncommon for dogs to bolt from the car.
- If they do have a crate, tell them to keep the leash *on the dog* with the handle of the leash sticking out so they'll have something to hold onto before opening the crate door. (Small dogs are notorious for being able to bolt out of crates and squeeze by even the quickest hands. A large dog may become frightened if it tries to bolt and must be quickly restrained by this person he/she doesn't know.)
- If no crate, advise adopters to secure the dog in the car with a leash (tie the leash to the post of a headrest or the grip handle on the ceiling).
- If someone will be holding the dog in the car, tell them to *keep the leash on the dog*.

At home

- Once home, it's strongly recommended that dogs drag a light leash for the first 3 days (decompression period) so the adopter can gently guide the dog on/off furniture, to the potty spot, etc. This is especially important for shy/fearful dogs that may not wish to get close to a person they don't know yet. Light leashes can be purchased cheaply at the Dollar Store.
- Doorways are a particular hazard. The leash provides an extra layer of safety because it can be stepped on should the dog bolt.
- For dogs that are very likely to try and flee (nervous dogs, breeds that like to explore), suggest to adopters that they put a baby gate or ex-pen in place to block the dog from the door.