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SAFETY FIRST

5 Doable vs. Realistically Doable Considerations

Let's face it, adopting a dog is one of the greatest thrills we humans can experience. Having a dog, especially a puppy, run up with tail-wagging excitement, climb into our arms and whine with joy...well, there's nothing better. What great way to start off the New Year!

Once the new puppy or dog is brought home, usually within a month or so, it's as if he or she says, "*now that we're all familiar with each other, let me introduce you to who I really am.*" So, the honeymoon is over and reality sets in. The new arrival starts barking, jumping, chewing, running out the door, stealing, pulling on the leash and so on. The good news is, all the vast majority of these dogs need is some basic education. So everyone stays safe and our newly adopted dog becomes a cherished, well-mannered member of polite society. Everyone lives happily-ever-after.

But sometimes more serious behavioral issues pop up and have to be addressed. Fearful dogs, like dogs with separation anxiety, or high-strung dogs that need more physical, mental and emotional stimulation, often manifest their inner stress with excessive barking, stealing and chewing stuff up, eliminating all over the house and so on. The stars-in-the-eyes adopter then finds him or herself in a difficult situation. Now what do you do? These become very emotionally difficult situations, especially if aggression is involved.

Calling a professional trainer is the first thing any adopter should do. The professional trainer will evaluate the situation and set up a step-by-step behavior modification program. This is especially critical if there are safety issues.

Professional trainers are not only advocates for new adopters, they are equal advocates for the newly adopted dog. And sometimes the professional trainer needs to deliver an extra dose of empathy and sensitivity along with their expert advice. In some cases, it becomes a tough balancing act because not all adoptions work out so well. Frankly, a particular dog isn't always a good fit with a particular household.

Doable vs Realistically Doable

Almost always, unwanted or problem behaviors can be changed, that is, *"it's doable."* A trainer will demonstrate the exact training methods that need to be learned and practiced and will set up a step-by-step program to give the family an idea of what's in store. But sometimes, things aren't quite so easy. Whether a particular dog's behavior can be appreciably modified is based on five criteria that determine whether the situation is *"realistically doable."* You'll notice these same points should be considered before even adopting a dog.

These five criteria are:

- Time
- Money
- Emotional Commitment
- Skills
- Environment

Time Does the family have the time to provide all the physical, mental and emotional needs that all dogs need? What about the added attention a special-needs dog must have, including specialized training, play and socialization?

In the busy, fast-paced, hectic lifestyle that we live in, sometimes it is really difficult for people to set aside the time necessary for any appreciable behavioral changes to take root. People who are away from home 8-10 hours a day will have a difficult time raising any dog, let alone a newly adopted puppy, or a special-needs dog. Or what about a family who has suddenly become a multi-dog household? More dogs mean more time is needed. The time consideration is critical and should be well thought out before any adoption.

And as to how much time it takes to solve some problems, I tell people that dogs are like humans, some habits are difficult to change. A simple example: if someone changed your silverware drawer, how long would it take you to stop going back to the old drawer? It usually takes 2-12 months for a habit to take hold but can take more than a year to change ingrained habits. Many people simply aren't able or willing to change their lives, let alone the dog's life to that extent.

Money Working with a skilled, competent professional force-free dog trainer costs money as well as time. Depending on the behavioral problem being addressed, the amount of money spent on training sessions can add up. Money is also a prime consideration if there are behavioral issues relating to the dog's health to consider. Vet visits get pricey too, if it comes to light that the dog has any physical ailments. Once again, this is an important consideration before adopting any dog. If possible, find out as much as you can about the dog's history, including any medical history.

Emotional Commitment It is emotionally draining if a person is spending hours during the day worrying about whether a living room is being destroyed because of their dog's separation anxiety or if there's poop all over the floor or whether the older incumbent dog is finding it difficult adjusting to the new reactive dog or if the neighbors are calling the apartment's landlord because of the incessant barking or if there's no money for medical bills or whether the dog is going to bite someone. The list goes on and on and the emotional stress on the family takes a toll and can begin to affect relationships at work and at home. As a trainer, I've seen many human relationships strained and actually come apart because of the conflicting ideas of what to do.

Skills I am horrible with anything having to do with computers. I'm not a mechanic, a doctor, lawyer, or opera singer. My skills are in the dog training world. And, just like I can never become the least bit proficient in any of those other walks of life, many people simply cannot become skilled trainers. My dad was a great example. He enjoyed our dogs but could not, for the life of him, be proactive in his training. And his timing was terrible. He learned from his dad that dogs simply needed to be corrected. Hence the pinning on the ground, yelling, leash corrections, swatting with newspapers and all the rest. Yet he was a great firefighter, carpenter, electrician, and baseball player. His skills in using prevention and management for safety and teaching a dog basic behaviors using positive, force-free methods was something he never grasped. As a result, none of our family dogs lived past the age of seven.

Environment People who live in apartments and adopt a serially vocal dog with separation anxiety are often given 30 days to fix the problem or else. People who adopt large reactive dogs with hair-trigger sound and motion sensitivities don't fit in well with a family who has three children under the age of five, including a new baby! Also, if the family already has an older dog who is set in his ways or has any health problems that might include creaky joints, it makes for a very stressful environment when a younger, more reactive dog is brought home.

And living space is a definite consideration as to whether a training program will be effective. I once visited a client who was a hoarder. Things were piled in every room with only small walkways leading from one room to another. And the outside was the same. There was no place for the dog to play, no place for training and no room for human or dog guests to visit.

Resolutions

Hoping for the best possible outcome, any decision an adopter makes must factor in what is best for the dog. Changing a dog's behavior is almost always *do-able*. But if two or more of the five criteria listed above cannot be addressed, then providing a dog with the training, socialization, play and medical care he or she needs is not *realistically do-able*. In those situations, and if all other options have been considered, sometimes the emotionally difficult choice of finding a better home for the dog is an option that should be seriously considered, not only for improved quality of life, but for safety concerns.

If aggression is involved, sometimes only one of these factors is all that should be considered, especially if children are involved.

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