

Pet Connection: Keys to finding the right home for an adult cat

By Gina Spadafori -

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No matter how sweet, no matter how lovely and no matter how well-mannered they may be, for homeless cats, this time of year is not their friend.

That's because late summer and early fall are peak kitten season, when so many kittens are born that there aren't enough homes for them all. And that means an adult cat will hardly get a look when someone visits the shelter.

That's a shame. Because as cute as kittens are, an adult cat can often ease into a household more quickly, and without the sometimes over-the-top behavior of an energetic youngster.

If you're trying to find a home for an adult cat -- perhaps because a relative or neighbor has passed on, or a cat has just "showed up" and you already have a houseful -- it's never an easy task. But if you're determined to do your best for the cat -- and be patient while you try -- you probably will succeed.

The first step to placing an adult cat may be convincing prospective owners that an adult cat is worth considering, or that two cats are better than one if there's already a resident cat. Here are some tips to follow:

Do everything you can to make the animal more adoptable. The pet has a better chance for adoption if her vaccinations are current, she uses her litter box reliably, and she's altered.

Don't lie about the pet's problems or why she's being placed. Although finding a new home for a pet with problems takes longer, you can usually still do so. But the person who gets such a pet without warning is likely to bring her back, take her to a shelter or give her away -- maybe to a horrible situation.

Spread the news. Make up fliers, and take out an ad in your newspaper and on Internet sites. Post the fliers everywhere you can: bulletin boards at work, pet-supply stores and your veterinarian's office. Give some to your friends and family to post where they work, too. Talk up the cat (at least briefly) with everyone you know. Even people who don't like cats (or don't want one) may know someone who is looking for a pet. The more exposure you can get, the better. If a thousand people hear or read about the animal, you probably will get no interest from 999, but you need only one person to provide a good home for the cat. And that's the one you need to reach.

Ask lots of questions and verify that the answers are true. Don't forget to ask prospective adopters whether they've had pets before and what happened to them. Make sure you're dealing with people who realize that owning a pet is a long-term commitment. The person who has had a

lot of pets who've disappeared, died young or were given away is probably not your best choice. My favorite question: Who's your veterinarian? Someone who cannot at least name a vet or a veterinary hospital may have pets who don't go there very often. Above all, don't give up! It may take weeks to find the right home for a pet, but it's always worth the time it may take to get it right. The goal here is not to "get rid of" an animal, but to find a loving, caring and, most of all, permanent home for a pet who needs one. They're out there, and if you keep looking, you'll likely find the home that's just right for the cat you're trying to help.

Or maybe, like a lot of people who foster pets, you'll decide there's room for one more in your own home.

Petfinder.com: Advocates for homeless animals

When it comes to helping animals find new homes, no Web site has the reach and the power of www.Petfinder.com. With thousands of shelters and rescue groups listing several hundred thousand homeless animals on the site at any given time, Petfinder.com is a must-visit for anyone looking to adopt a new pet.

But Petfinder is more than a matchmaking service for people and pets. In the weeks following Hurricane Katrina, Petfinder stepped up to help coordinate disaster response for the animals left behind. And recent changes on the site help pet lovers solve behavior problems that leave pets in danger of being given up.

I've been an unabashed supporter of PetFinder.com since its earliest days, and I'm happy to see the site just keep getting better.

Q&A

In defense of declawing

Q: Having recently lost our 21-year-old cat who passed away after a slow decline from kidney failure (and three years of daily fluids which we lovingly administered), we decided to adopt a kitten to befriend our 2-year-old male cat (rescued and nursed through a near-deadly upper-respiratory infection).

After contacting a local rescue group, we were told that we were not suitable pet owners because we were "declawers" and that no organization would adopt out to "people like us." I was angry and horrified to think that local shelters would rather put down animals than adopt them out to us.

We treat our pets like members of the family. Declawing is not a cosmetic procedure like ear- or tail-lobbing, which I'm not a big fan of. My cats and I have a great loving relationship that is not hindered by my attempting to modify their natural behavior. They can feign scratching and scent-mark their territory, the house, with their paws to their hearts' content.

Can you speak to this issue?

- M.B., via e-mail

A: Rescue organizations and shelters are trying to do what's best for the animals in their care, and they're defining "good home" as they see fit. I can't fault them on trying to do their best for animals, although I have run across many instances where I felt they could have bent the rules to fit the circumstances where a good home needed a little leeway.

I find it interesting, however, that you are opposed to ear crops and tail docks, and yet you see nothing wrong with amputating all the final digits of a cat's front toes as a pre-emptive form of behavioral modification without even trying to train him to use a scratching post. What's the harm in trying non-surgical strategies first? Declawing is to me a last-ditch response to a behavior problem that can often be dealt with more humanely.

As for adopting a kitten with the intent to declaw him, why not instead adopt a cat who has already been declawed? It seems to me that this would keep everyone satisfied and would provide a cat with a wonderful home.

Running dogs

Q: I think you've answered this before, but I can't find it. My daughter is on her high school cross-country team and wants to have our puppy as a running companion. The pup's a golden retriever, 9 months old. Any precautions?

- M.W., via e-mail

A: A healthy adult golden retriever will make a wonderful running companion, but let this pup grow up before your daughter starts hitting the pavement with her. Putting a lot of miles on a young dog who's not fully developed isn't a good idea, and it could lead to injuries.

Instead, work on walks, short runs and thorough leash-training, so when the dog is ready to be a full-fledged running partner, she won't pull your daughter off her feet.

Any serious runner who wants to take on an adult canine running partner needs to check in with the veterinarian and then bring the dog along gradually. A dog is so happy to be out with his person that he won't know when to say "enough." Work on leash-manners -- no pulling -- and gradually building up the dog's fitness level.

Once a dog's a fit running companion, a runner still needs to take precautions. No running in the heat of the day, and no running off-leash in areas where it's not safe or legal. It only takes one squirrel running across the street in front of a dog to provoke a chase and an accident. I used to live across from a park with a running path around its edges, and I witnessed a great many near-misses and a few canine fatalities because of people who believed their dog was trained well enough to be off-leash in a high-traffic area.

(Do you have a pet question? Send it to petconnection@gmail.com.)

PET Rx

Fall shedding a normal event

Dogs typically lose their winter coats in the spring, when it is replaced by a shorter, lighter one for summer. In the fall, this cycle is reversed, as the summer coat is shed to make room for heavy protective fur for winter.

The change is most obvious in "double-coated" breeds such as collies, malamutes and keeshonden. Those breeds carry not only a harsh, protective long overcoat, but also a soft, insulating undercoat -- and they lose masses of fur from both in spring and fall.

All shedding can be tamed by a regular and frequent schedule of combing and brushing. After all, the fur you catch on a comb won't end up on a rug.

All shedding -- and heavy seasonal shedding -- is normal, but some heavy shedding can be a sign of health problems. Skin allergies and skin parasites may trigger shedding, and poor nutrition can also be a cause of coat problems.

Become familiar with your pet's normal pattern of shedding, and ask your veterinarian for advice if a pet's coat condition seems to dull or if excessive hair loss is noticed.

(Pet Rx is provided by the Veterinary Information Network (VIN.com), an online service for veterinary professionals. More information can be found at www.veterinarypartner.com.)

PETS ON THE WEB

Parrot smarts in spotlight

To the folks at the Alex Foundation (www.alexfoundation.org), "bird brain" isn't an insult. Through the work of Irene Pepperberg, parrots have been shown to have a greater understanding of the world and an ability to communicate that goes far beyond "parroting."

Pepperberg's work with African Grey parrots started with Alex, purchased from a Chicago pet store in 1977. Alex can recognize and name colors, can count, and can identify objects from photographs.

The Alex Foundation's Web site gives an overview of Pepperberg's work -- she's currently affiliated with Brandeis and Harvard universities -- as well as offering a gift shop and newsletter archives.

DOGMOBILE

Honda's Element a near-perfect canine conveyance

Few vehicles suit dog lovers as well as the Honda Element. With its easy-clean interior, easy-stow seats and good fuel economy, the Element has to be at the top of any dog lover's short list of vehicles.

To test the Element, I took a day trip of several hundred miles with my youngest retriever in tow to watch some of the world's top canine agility teams compete for slots at their national championships. I flipped the rear seats against the side walls, put down an old bedspread and a soft dog bed, and whistled young McKenzie into her ride.

I immediately noticed a great and surely accidental dog-friendly feature on the Element: windows that are resistant to nose prints. The windows are placed high on the vehicle -- so high that you can't comfortably rest your arm on the driver's side windowsill. And for a dog resting on the floor of the Element, it's tough to put nose prints on the window.

The Element also has clamshell rear doors, the glass opening up for ventilation and the tailgate flipping down to make a great seat.

For two dogs and a longer trip, I'd pop out the rear seats entirely -- not only for the extra cargo room, but also because the seats block the rear windows when they are up, making changing lanes a little more challenging.

My only quibble is a minor one: The cup holders are on the floor, between the two front seats. That meant McKenzie decided to help herself to my drink when I was driving. I'd rather have cup holders come out from the dash, since I don't like sharing my coffee with the four-leggers.

Contrary to widespread belief, you cannot hose out an Element. Instead, I used my forced-air dog dryer to blast any dirt and dog hair from the cargo area before turning the vehicle back in. Everything flew off the rubber mats and out the back door. Sweet!

PETS BY THE NUMBERS

Toys for us!

According to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 62 percent of dog owners buy toys for their pets. The top toys reported by those buyers, by percentage reported purchased, with multiple answers allowed:

Balls 63 percent

Plush 44 percent

Rope 40 percent

Hard rubber 31 percent

Nylon bones 26 percent

PET TIP

Make eating a challenge

The latest buzz in bird behavior advice: "foraging." In the wild, birds spend all their waking hours looking for food, while their domestic relatives are bored, often unfit and fat. Making pet birds "forage" for their meals helps keep them happy and healthy.

You can find toys at any bird-supply retailer that will allow food to be hidden inside for birds to work out the puzzle. You can also create your own challenges for your bird, such as by wrapping food in paper that must be torn away in layers before the food can be found. Favorite bits of food -- such as seeds -- can also be used to teach tricks to birds, thereby exercising a pet's mind along with his body.

The harder your bird has to work for his food, the better off he will be, and the less likely you'll be dealing with behavior problems caused by boredom.