TUFTS CUMMINGS SCHOOL OF VETERINARY MEDICINE

Your Dog

The Newsletter for Caring Dog Owners

NEW LIFE TO OLD DOG

When an owner who claimed not to have enough time for her surrendered Mandy to the Marin Humane Society, the 7-year-old tri-color Rough Collie was in pitiful condition. She was 7 years old and 20 pounds overweight, and her weak hind legs could barely hold her up. Her coat was matted, and her incontinence had burned the skin on her legs from contact with urine soaking the matted fur.

I grew up with Collies and have a soft spot in my heart for them. I offered to foster Mandy and help her through rehabilitation so she could adopted. She walked into my home and my heart as if she'd lived there all her life.

Most folks think puppy when they're considering a new canine family member. Puppies are appealing - and a lot of work. They eliminate everywhere, chew stuff, have miserably sharp teeth, need lots of vaccinations, spay/neuter surgery, training classes and tons of attention. They have boundless energy and often can't - or shouldn't - be left alone all day.

MATURE COMPANION

Consider a more mature canine companion. An older dog may already be housetrained. If not, he's usually physically capable of "holding it" once he's introduced to the concept. He's probably calmer than a puppy, well past the chewing stage, already neutered and likely less needy overall.

Shelters and rescue groups have a steady supply of senior Setters, aging Am Staffs, geriatric German Shepherds, timeworn Terriers, elderly Elkhounds, venerable Vizslas, mature mixed breeds and more.

Puppies are generally in great demand. At all but the most overcrowded shelters, they're likely to be adopted. Seniors wait and wait - sometimes for the remainder of their lives - for a new forever family to recognize their irresistible qualities and take them home. You can do a good deed and avoid puppy headaches by adopting an older dog.

You may not be completely off the hook, however. Sometimes an older dog is given up because of behavior or health problems. An owner may or may not be forthcoming with this information. Stray dogs come with little or no known history, so you could have a complete mystery at the end of your leash - and a package of potential problems.

Some older adoption candidates are gems. They've lost their homes through no fault of their own - an owner died and no one in the family could take the dog. A beloved pet became lost, and a heartbroken owner is looking in all the wrong places. A divorce occurred with neither partner able to keep the dog. Moving overseas, called for active duty, owner health problems - are all legitimate reasons for a wonderful dog to find himself in need of a home.

In reality, however, when an older dog is in search of a new family, there's often some reason, large or small, that the bond wasn't strong enough for his previous family to make the effort to keep him. Common challenges you might face with a senior dog include:

* House soiling
* Destructive behavior

* Escaping (see sidebar)
* Poor socialization
* Bad manners
* Separation anxiety
* Current or future health problems

A committed, new owner may easily resolve behaviors that caused a dog to be surrendered. Sometimes the problem is harder to fix, but a true dog lover knows it's worth the effort. Here are tips to prepare you for the challenges you may face:

HOUSETRAINING

Senior Sam may already be housetrained. Sometimes the shelter or rescue can tell you this - sometimes you'll find out on your own. Assume he's not or that he'll need a refresher course, and treat him as you would an 8-week-old pup. Keep him under direct supervision, take him out every hour on the hour to his designated potty spot, and reward him generously for doing his business. You'll soon know if he's really housetrained. If not, it's probably for one or more of the following reasons:

1. He's lived outdoors and doesn't know about life indoors. He should be fairly easy to housetrain with a standard training program - constant supervision, crating when supervision isn't possible and frequent trips outdoors on leash until he gets the idea.

2. He's a *"marker"* - lifting his leg everywhere in the house. Use a *"belly band"* - and strip of cloth pinned or Velcro'd around his abdomen, with a sanitary pad inside - while you work on the standard housetraining program. Neutering often slows or stops this behavior but not always.

3. He's been forced to soil his kennel or crate - the hardest to retrain. He may come from a puppy mill, hoarder or a substandard rescue group - where dogs are kept in filthy kennels and crates. Forcing a dog to soil his living space weakens his instinct to keep his den clean. The crate is normally an invaluable housetraining tool, but you won't be able to use it with this dog. You can "reverse" crate train - crate him only when you know he's empty and take him out often enough that he doesn't dirty his den.

4. He belonged to someone, perhaps elderly or ill, who was unable to take him out. You may be able to use the crate with this dog, and might consider training him to use an indoor litter box if house soiling persists.

5. He has a urinary tract infection or intestinal upset. The most common symptom of UTI is multiple small puddles, even in his crate, even when he's just been out. Parasites and digestive tract disorders can cause diarrhea - he can't control it. He'll be impossible to housetrain until you treat the problem. If you suspect a medical cause, make an appointment with your veterinarian.

Destructive Behavior

Generalized destructive behavior is a sign of a dog who had too much house freedom too soon and never learned appropriate house manners. Often mislabeled as separation anxiety, this behavior may occur when the owner's home, even in his presence. In the owner's absence, it tends to be non-specific general chewing, as opposed to the focused destruction of separation anxiety.

The answer to this is management: Remove all opportunity for him to misbehave. Use crates, tethers, baby gates, exercise pens and closed doors to prevent his access to vulnerable items. Keep stuff out of his reach. Provide him with plenty of legal chew objects while you restrict his access to forbidden ones.

Don't forget adequate exercise. A tired dog is a well-behaved dog. "Adequate exercise" means tongue-dragging, chase-the-ball sessions or hours of play with a compatible canine pal. A walk around the block is an exercise hors d'oeuvre for a healthy, active dog - even an older one. Check with your veterinarian to determine how much exercise is appropriate, then go to it.

POOR SOCIALIZATION

Poor socialization is an inherent problem with backyard dogs, breeder dogs who have spent their entire lives in cages or kennels making puppies, and dogs who lived with senior citizens or otherwise never got out much to see the world. If your Aging Annie is fearful of people, other dogs and/or the world in general, she probably missed out on her all-important puppy socialization lessons.

You'll usually see this behavior before you even take Annie home. At the shelter, rescue group or owner's home, she'll probably be reluctant to come to you, or overreact to sounds and movement in her environment. You may lose your heart to a scaredy dog, but beware! They're not an easy fix. The Beatles were wrong when they said "All You Need Is Love." It won't be enough to fix her fears. An older, poorly socialized dog will probably never be normal. She may learn to be comfortable in your home but will likely always be fearful of new things, despite your best efforts to reassure her.

If you're looking for a "normal" dog to share life's adventures, pass by Annie. If you want a project, contact a good behavior consultant to determine the management and modification necessary to keep Annie safe and comfortable. If you still want a project, take her home.

LACK OF MANNERS

Elder Ernie jumps enthusiastically on your chest to greet you and says hello to visitors with equal gusto. He routinely checks counters to see if anyone left any edibles within reach. He dislocates your shoulder when he hits the end of his leash at top speed, barking madly at a passing dog. He bounces off your coffee table as he charges through your house. Ernie is driving you crazy because no one ever taught him how to behave.

You can teach an old dog new tricks. Load up on management tools, and enroll Ernie in a positive training class as soon as possible. It may take him longer than younger classmates to unlearn his undesirable habits and learn the right stuff, but he can do it.

The secret is to remember that a dog's goal in life is to make good stuff happen. If you can prevent Ernie from being rewarded for the behaviors you don't like and reward him generously for the ones you do, he'll change his ways. Leashes, tethers, baby gates, crates, exercise pens and closed doors will keep him out of trouble. Basic good manners training, reinforcement for desirable behaviors and our old friend exercise will put him on the right track.

SEPARATION ANXIETY

Far more challenging than general bad house manners, separation anxiety is a full-blown panic attack over being left alone. Behavior professionals note a high incidence of this behavior in shelter dogs. It's unknown whether shelters induce the stress or dogs end up at shelters because their owners can't deal with this difficult behavior. Perhaps it's both.

Regardless of the cause, it's a tough syndrome to live with. Separation anxiety can manifest itself as extreme destructive behavior, often directed toward escape at doorways and windows. Some dogs will chew through walls and door frames, or jump through closed windows. It may be evidenced in inappropriate elimination - dogs who urinate and defecate all over the house due to unbearable distress. Some dogs bark, howl or scream continuously until someone comes home to relieve their panic. Dogs who have separation anxiety often can't be crated - their panic worsens in close confinement, and they may injure themselves trying to escape.

You can test Venerable Victor for separation anxiety by leaving him alone in a get-acquainted room or other confined space. Leave a cheap throw pillow you bought for this purpose at a yard sale in the room with him. If he becomes frantic, digs at the door, barks, howls and rips up the cushion, consider another dog, or arm yourself for a behavior modification challenge.

It's a good idea to talk to a qualified behavior professional before adopting a dog with separation anxiety and work closely with one if you choose to proceed with Victor's adoption or discover his separation anxiety after bringing him home. A behavior modification program may be long-term and require the use of doggie daycare or other pet-sitting options, and the administration of behavior modification drugs while you work to help him gradually accept being home alone.

HEALTH ISSUES

Your Geriatric Genie may, like Mandy, come with built-in health problems that require an immediate expense to repair. Neglected teeth, overgrown nails, matted coats, bad hips, eye problems, heartworm, tumors and incontinence are some of the problems you may inherit. Ask the owner or agency did you know? Freud ended therapy when his Chow stood and yawned. 11 if you can have a complete physical for the dog before you commit to adoption, so you know what you're getting into. They may be willing to absorb or split the cost of an exam, or you may have to pay for it all yourself.

Treatment for multiple or serious health problems could run into hundreds, even thousands of dollars. Like us, older dogs need additional care as their bodies start to fail. Know that this will happen and prepare financially, so it doesn't come as a surprise.

Mandy was one of the gems. She never, ever, took a wrong behavior step. By the time I resolved all her health problems, there was no way I could give her up. The five years I shared my life with her before she succumbed to a stroke at age 12 were a true gift, and I'll always treasure the time we had together. Whether you adopt one of the already polished gems or find a diamond in the rough, you may find the love of your life, as I did, in a canine senior citizen.