

How to Choose a People Friendly Dog from a Shelter

PROD has received permission from Sue Sternberg to reprint information from her book, "Successful Dog Adoption". More information on this insightful publication can be found elsewhere on our Websitego to [More Resources](#) and click on [Links and More](#).

Our organization encourages anyone who is interested in adding a canine to their family dynamic, to give much thought to the process before adopting. According to Sternberg, "Overall, be looking for a dog that really *likes* people and wants to be with them, who is affectionate, congenial, and bonds easily and strongly. These are the dogs who are the most fun, and the least worry to live with." **We feel a dog that is mistrustful, aloof, frightened, or overly active is best left to an experienced owner who has the time and skills to help that canine become a valued member of the family.** We ask you to consider the following behavioral criteria when assessing a new family companion:

1. **Approach a dog's kennel without saying anything, then turn and face the dog.** Look neutral - neither threaten nor smile. Stand upright and make eye contact with the dog. If the dog just wiggles and wags, avoids sustained, direct eye contact or glances into your eyes and glances away a few times, squints and solicits affection, it's a good sign that the dog is sociable.
2. **In your preliminary observation of the dog, and throughout these next 14 steps, always make note of the dog's tail carriage.** Look for a dog who carries her tail mostly level or low. Especially if you have young children, select a dog who carries her tail level or low and rarely, if ever, raises it much above her back, other than to investigate the environment or when she hears or sees something novel.
3. **Bend down and at eye level place your open hand against the fencing.** Do not stick your fingers through the fencing! Will the dog approach you or your offered hand and make a sustained connection (for 2 seconds or longer).
4. **Move your hand four inches in all directions** to see if the dog is truly interested in interacting with you. The truly sociable dog will follow your hand wherever it moves or will smooch her body broadside along the front of the cage to get you to touch her anywhere.
5. **Find a relatively quiet, indoor area to meet the dog outside** of the kennel or cage. Remain neutral to see if the dog shows signs of true friendliness (meaning, ignore the dog - don't touch, look at, or speak to). Does the dog make first contact in a friendly way, trying to get your attention for affection? (Some of the reactions you don't want to see are mouthiness, brutally jumping on you, or sniffing you but showing no other signs of affection.)
6. **Now stroke the dog** starting on the back of his neck and travel down to the base of his tail. Pause in between repeating strokes two and three. The dog who seeks more affection and turns to you for more is a social, friendly pet dog. If the dog shakes you off, moves or lunges away, she is telling you she doesn't like being petted, or being around you.
7. **Sit in a chair** without saying anything to see if the dog recognizes a human in a chair and comes over for some affection and attention. Once you observe the dog is social, spend 20 seconds petting, praising and showing affection. The dog who comes right over, snuggles close and remains with you for the full 20 seconds, is showing a friendly response.

8. **Test to see how well the dog listens** to you by first allowing the dog to investigate or sniff the area around you. While she is engaged in sniffing, stand behind her and clap your hands twice, loudly and sharply say “**Hey**”. A positive response would be if the dog immediately stops what she is doing, turns around, comes to you and offers a low tail, nuzzling or licking your hand, lowered body, lip licking, and cuddles up close to you.

9. **Test to see if the dog can relax** after 3 or 4 minutes of playing any sort of game like fetch, tug of war, or chase. When the game is over, abruptly stop (put toy out of sight), and make a note on how long it takes her to disengage from playing and to return to you to settle and socialize, perhaps sit and lie down next to you. Ideally she will do this within 2 minutes. If she is still hyper after 5 minutes, and unless you are looking for a high energy companion, this is the kind of energy level that the average dog household is not equipped to handle.

If you’ve made it this far with the dog and want to continue testing, ask for assistance from a shelter employee or qualified volunteer. If you can’t get the needed help, do not move forward with the test.

This next test is to determine the likelihood that the dog will harm someone when she has something that she considers valuable. **Be aware that different dogs find different things valuable.**

10. **A test for “Resource Guarding”** - Hand a small bowl of kibble, or a handful of biscuits you brought with you, to your helper and instruct him to place the bowl on the floor, between you and the dog (should be enough to last for about 1 minute to eat). When the dog takes an interest in the food observe her response, where is her tail carriage? Ask your helper to take one step toward the food bowl. A good response is if the dog pauses in her eating, looks up, starts wagging her tail and puts her ears back. If the dog repositions herself so that she is between the helper and the food bowl, or starts frantically gulping, or shows the whites of her eyes as she eats tensely be very careful. Of course a dog that growls, bites, or freezes over the food bowl is best put back in the kennel by the helper.

With a dog that gave a favorable response, and if the helper has an “assess-a-hand”, have him stroke the dog as she is eating and pat her head to see if the dog continues to display a relaxed response.

11. **Take the dog for a walk on a leash** (outside if possible) to see if the dog is interested in the environment but checks back often with you, looking at you, putting her ears back and softens her expression when she does.

12. **When introducing your children to a dog** it is a good sign if the dog comes to the front of the kennel, orienting toward the child with her tail low and with a sweeping or circular wag. The dog’s ears should be back and her eyes squinty and soft, and she should be licking or nuzzling, but not mouthing. Be aware that most dogs just tolerate children, but some dogs truly love the company of children.

13. **Testing with a cat** - If the shelter can show you how the leashed dog reacts to a caged cat, it will give you an indication of how the dog might do with your cat at home. What you don’t

want is a dog that stares at a cat with intense focus, where the dog's gaze **cannot** be interrupted by verbally calling, or coaxing her away. This response indicates a high predatory instinct.

14. **If you've determined your prospective adoptee is people friendly**, there's no guarantee that she will also be canine friendly. Be sure to ask the shelter staff **how this dog interacts with the other dogs** at the facility. If you have a dog at home, ask if you can bring your dog to the shelter to set up an introduction between the two.

We understand that the average adopter from a shelter is a family with children, perhaps with another dog already or, perhaps with a cat in the household, whose parents are relatively inexperienced in handling and training a dog. If the dog you choose fits the above behavioral criteria, PROD feels you have a better chance of enjoying your canine for many years to come.