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# Top 10 Tips for Matching Shelter Pets with Adoptive Parents

Use Expert Interview Techniques to Find Forever Homes for Dogs and Cats

## Introduction

Americans relinquish [approximately 2.5 million](#) cats and dogs to animal shelters each year.

**Relinquishment is heartbreaking**—for the staff at resource-challenged shelters, for the people who give up the animals, and for the pets who thought they had found their forever homes.

How can you help? In this ebook, we'll tell you how! After reading our top 10 tips, you'll be able to better assess each potential adopter's goals and make a good match with an adorable fur ball. Use our helpful prompts for feel-good conversations with prospective pet owners, and help Rocky and Rags find their new best friends.

## Tip #1

[Find out if anyone in the household has an allergy to pet dander.](#)

**Allergies to pet dander are bad news—for pets and the people who want to love them.** [ABC News reports](#) that 15% of the total U.S. population is allergic to dogs and cats. The [Asthma and Allergy Foundation reports](#) that cat allergies are twice as common as dog allergies, and relinquishment data supports that fact. [“Allergies” is the number-one reason pet owners relinquish cats, and the third most common reason owners relinquish dogs.](#)

Humans with pet allergies who want to adopt anyway must be willing to live with and treat the symptoms. If potential adopters don't know if a member of their household is allergic, **the best solution is to expose them to a dog or cat for a short while and see how they react.**

## Interview Prompt Examples

- “One question we need to cover is allergies. Just last week, a wonderful mom of two boys returned a tabby because she didn't know that her oldest was allergic to cats. Has everyone in your household lived with a dog/cat before with no problems?”
- “I hear you saying you're not exactly sure how you and your family would react to the dog/cat dander. Would you possibly consider fostering for a couple of weeks, or volunteering here at the shelter? That way, we can make sure you won't suffer from allergies.”

## Tip #2

### Ask the family about upcoming life changes.

[Change causes stress](#), because we've cut ties with the familiar and are learning how to think and act in new ways. [Normal life transitions require us to flex our emotional muscles, demonstrate patience, and be flexible.](#)

Think about how many major upheavals we go through in the normal course of living: graduation, moving, marriage, new baby, new job, illness, break-ups, financial difficulties, the death of a loved one, retirement, and illness.

Take a potential adopter who's going through one of these life transitions, and insert a new furry friend into the picture. Aw, she's so cute! But that new roommate requires daily care, feeding, and exercise. Fido may or may not be housetrained, chew the furniture, hide under the bed, or eat the trash.

Why add stress on top of stress? **For potential adopters, the best solution is to wait out the emotional storm and then make a decision.**

### Interview Prompt Examples

- "I don't want to seem nosy, but I'd like to check in with you about big changes that might be on the horizon. Like a breakup, marriage, new baby, a move, or kids leaving home. Anything like that going on at home?"
- "Wow, that *is* a big change! It's completely natural to want the [comfort/excitement/challenge] of a pet during [life transition]. What I'd be concerned about is that this may not be the right time to introduce even more change."
- "We've seen some folks have a really rough time adapting to the needs of a new furry roommate when they're going through a major change. Have you thought about waiting a few months and letting things settle down before getting a new dog/cat?"

## Tip #3

### Help the adopter fully understand the role of primary caregiver.

"We want to get little Johnny a puppy to teach him responsibility." Pets and kids *do* seem to go together like peas and carrots. As suggested in [Parents magazine](#), pets help kids learn, provide comfort, build a family bond, and even improve kids' immunity. The [New York Times reports](#) that having pets leads kids to be more cooperative and share more.

**But [a child cannot be the primary caregiver for a pet.](#)** Children's brains have not physically developed to the point where they can foresee the consequences of their actions—what happens if they leave the gate open or forget to fill the food dish?

As the [Harvard University Center on the Developing Child explains](#), "Executive function and self-regulation skills are the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully." It takes time, practice, and a healthy environment for a child to develop the skills necessary to care for a pet. In fact, [the executive function of the brain does not fully develop until the age of 25.](#)

Responsibility for pet care could be a touchy issue. What to do? Remind the potential adopter about the required pet-care tasks, and **make a recommendation about how to realistically involve the child.**

#### Interview Prompt Examples

- “Will the primary caregiver for the dog/cat be you or another family member? That means taking care of the routine tasks like cleaning the [yard/litterbox] several times a week, making sure the water is fresh, taking the pet to the vet, walking or exercising, and feeding on schedule.”
- “Oh, sure, I understand that you want little Johnny to be involved. What we recommend is giving a child [one age-appropriate task](#). A child Johnny’s age could be responsible for putting fresh water in the bowl every day. And of course, you’d still need to supervise and make sure it got done. Does that sound like a reasonable plan?”

#### Tip #4

Size up household members for a good match with the dog’s energy level.

**Two common reasons adopters relinquish pets to shelters are [“problematic behaviors” and “aggressive behaviors.”](#)** Here are examples of scenarios that lead to a (preventable) mismatch:

- ✓ The active family that camps and boats adopts a senior, arthritic dog.
- ✓ The runner adopts a dog that can’t keep up.
- ✓ A senior person adopts a dog that s/he can’t control on walks.
- ✓ An adopter with a fenced yard assumes that it will be sufficient exercise for the dog, when the dog really needs a daily walk.
- ✓ The couple that wants to take a dog to cookouts and brewpubs adopts a dog that is fear-aggressive and bites.
- ✓ The family with babies or toddlers adopts a large, rambunctious puppy that’s knocks down the little ones.

**Help the potential pet owner realistically assess the situation at home** versus the pet they want here and now.

#### Interview Prompt Examples

- “Based on what we’ve seen so far, this dog/cat is [younger/older, high energy/low energy, needs a lot of human interaction/is going to be a couch potato, fear-aggressive/timid].”
- “Let’s talk about how this dog’s energy level matches up with the folks who will be interacting with him.”
- “This [little/older/arthritic] dog probably isn’t going to be able to keep up with you on your [runs/hikes/bike rides/camping trips]. Maybe a [younger/larger] dog that has more stamina?”
- “It sounds like you’re going to be away from home for long stretches of time during the day and will travel a lot. I’m not sure that matches up with this dog’s/cat’s energy level.”
- “You’ve got a [baby/young child/elderly person/sick person] living at home. I’m afraid this huge puppy might knock him/her down. It will take some time and training before the dog is calm most of the time. Would you consider adopting an older, smaller dog that’s already trained?”

## Tip #5

Determine whether the experience level of the adopter is right for the pet.

One study of shelters across the country reports the [number-one reason for return of dogs to the shelter is “lack of time.”](#) One way to address that issue is to **match the type of pet with the adopter’s level of experience:**

- ✓ Inexperienced: likes dogs/cats but hasn’t raised one before  
Suggest fostering an adult pet before adoption
- ✓ Novice: some or little experience raising a pet  
Match with a trained adult pet
- ✓ Intermediate: has had good experiences raising several dogs/cats in the past  
Match with a healthy, trained puppy/kitten
- ✓ Advanced: extensive experience raising dogs/cats through their life cycles  
Match with an older or special-needs pet

## Interview Prompt Examples

- “What’s your previous experience with raising a dog/cat?”
- “Since you’ve never had a dog/cat before, I’d recommend fostering for a couple of weeks to see if it’s a fit for your lifestyle.”
- “It sounds like you’ve got some experience with dogs/cats, and the best fit would probably be a pet that’s a little bit older than a puppy/kitten that has some training already.”
- “You’ve got a fair amount of experience but haven’t raised a puppy/kitten before. I’d suggest a healthy, trained puppy/kitten or an adult.”
- “Wow, you’ve got a lot of experience. It sounds like you’re a ‘super pet parent!’ Would you consider adopting an older or special-needs pet?”
- “This dog is going to need some attention to address the [fear-biting/puppy behavior/vet visits and medications]. Do you think you’ve got that time in your schedule?”

## Tip #6

Check to see if the living quarters are a good match for the pet.

The [“landlord did not allow pets” and “didn’t have enough space for the pet” are two common reasons pet owners relinquish their animals](#) to the shelter. The interview is a good time to **talk about the adopter’s living space and how well it matches up to the pet:**

- ✓ Is it an apartment or a house?
- ✓ Is there a fenced yard?
- ✓ Is there a place to walk the dog daily (not just take him out for potty)?
- ✓ Will barking/baying be okay with the neighbors?
- ✓ Will the adopter be moving from a house to an apartment soon?

### Interview Prompt Examples

- “A common housing-related reason that causes people to relinquish pets is moving to a place where there isn’t pet-friendly housing. Does your landlord allow pets? Do you think you’ll be staying there a long time?”
- “These types of dogs tend to need a lot of daily exercise and mental stimulation. I’m not sure it’s a good fit for an apartment. Have you considered a cat?”
- “You’ve got two big dogs already. Since you don’t have a fenced yard, do you think you’ll have enough room for a third?”
- “Cats tend to do better with frequent moves than dogs.”

### Tip #7

#### Talk about how much it costs to own a pet.

It costs anywhere from \$1,000 to \$3,000 to adopt and care for a dog in the first year. Estimates for ongoing care range from \$500 a year on the low end to \$4,200 a year on the high end. Cats are cheaper than dogs (but not that much cheaper), and small-breed dogs are cheaper than large breeds. [Rover.com](#) estimates an average cost of \$2,858 per year to care for dogs. In other words, **it’s expensive to own a pet!**

What potential adopters don’t consider:

- ✓ Initial costs, such as adoption fees, leash, collar, kennel, food bowl, and toys
- ✓ Veterinary bills for regular check-ups, dental cleanings, flea and tick prevention, and vaccines
- ✓ Costs for ongoing care, such as litter, food, and poop bags
- ✓ Fees for dog sitters, boarding, and dog walkers
- ✓ Grooming costs: shampoo, nail trims, regular trips to the groomer
- ✓ For renters, nonrefundable deposits and monthly rent
- ✓ Replacement costs for the shoes, rugs, and furniture that the pet ruins
- ✓ Pet health insurance premiums
- ✓ The cost of obedience training and help with behavioral issues
- ✓ Unexpected veterinary bills for illness and accidents
- ✓ Euthanasia and cremation

The [topic of money has been a taboo subject in our society](#), and many people want to avoid it altogether. Depending on the messages we’ve received over our lifetimes, [talking about money can elicit feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety](#).

So it’s important to be frank, but nonjudgmental. **Help the potential adopter understand the real costs before adopting.** Expect and prepare for strong reactions. Except for empathy (we’ve all been anxious at one time or another), keep your emotions out of it.

### Interview Prompt Examples

- “One of the most common reasons pets get returned to us is because it costs more to care for a pet than most people think. I’d like to talk honestly with you about that.”
- “I know money can be a sticky subject, but are you feeling ready to make the substantial financial commitment it takes to care for a dog/cat?”

**Commented [EH1]:** Multiple sources:  
<http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/27/how-much-does-it-cost-to-own-a-dog-7-times-more-than-you-expect.html>  
<http://www.akc.org/content/dog-care/articles/cost-to-raise-dog/>  
[http://www.americanpetproducts.org/press\\_industrytrends.asp](http://www.americanpetproducts.org/press_industrytrends.asp)  
<http://www.businessinsider.com/how-much-it-actually-costs-to-own-a-cat-2015-8>  
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2016/08/24/how-much-costs-own-dog-per-year/88449800/>

- “After the initial adoption fees and investment in supplies, it costs anywhere from \$100 to \$300 per month to own a pet. That covers vet bills, food, and supplies. Does your family have that much in your budget?”
- “It sounds like that could be a strain on you financially. Have you thought about preparing for a pet by saving up for the adoption costs and putting aside \$200 each month to see how it affects your budget?”

### Tip #8

#### Help the adoptive family determine the right-sized pet for them.

[A pet “growing larger than expected” is a common reason people return pets to the shelter.](#) In other words, the puppy gets too big. **Size is a determining factor in creating a successful match.**

This is the perfect opportunity to discuss:

- ✓ How big the dog could get
- ✓ The option to choose a cat rather than a dog
- ✓ Whether the new pet will be a good companion for other pets in the household
- ✓ Whether it’s better to get a puppy or a dog that’s full-grown

If the family wants a snuggly little lap dog, that Lab puppy is cute now but probably won’t work for them in the long run.

#### Interview Prompt Examples

- “Dogs can take up a lot of space. They need a place to sleep, food and water bowls, and room to roam. It sounds like you’re looking for a smaller pet that doesn’t take up that much space. Am I right?”
- “This dog could grow much bigger. Do you think you’d be okay with an 80-pound lap dog that sheds?”
- “This puppy *could* get really big, and I’m worried about that being a problem for your baby and toddler. What do you think?”

### Tip #9

#### Watch the adopter(s) and the pet interact.

There should be some basic connection between the adopter and the pet. Help them understand that the animal could be different at home than at the shelter, but a dog that acts timid will probably remain somewhat timid. A rowdy puppy will take some training and patience. A big dog isn’t going to get any smaller... **What you’re trying to prevent is a mismatch between the adopter’s expectations and the reality of this particular dog or cat.**

Watch for obvious cues:

- ✓ Is the adopter or adopter’s family standoffish with the pet, or hands-on?
- ✓ Do they talk a lot about drool, or pet hair?
- ✓ Do they get down on the ground with the pet?
- ✓ Are they reading the pet’s reaction to them?
- ✓ Does the adopter respond harshly or timidly?

- ✓ Are the family members more interested in their phones than in interacting with the pet?

#### Interview Prompt Examples

- “It seems like this dog might be a little too much to handle. Should we look at a smaller, little bit more mature dog?”
- “You’ve said that you want a cat who will interact with your family and your dog. Do you think this one will be a good fit?”
- “I’ve noticed that you’re giving the dog time to come to you rather than expecting him to be friendly right away. That’s a good sign that you’ll have the patience to help him come out of his shell.”

#### Tip #10

##### Check that the reason for the adoption is good for the pet.

The interview is a good time to **do a gut-level check that the reason for adopting the pet is a good one**. Here’s when it is definitely NOT good for the pet:

- ✓ The adopter wants a guard dog that will be left out in the back yard or chained outside.
- ✓ The pet will be given as a gift to someone who has an allergy, can’t afford it, or has no experience with dogs/cats.
- ✓ The pet will be a companion for a person who is very sick or terminally ill.

#### Interview Prompt Examples

- “What would you say your main reason is for adopting this dog/cat?”
- “What role will this pet play in your family?”
- “What are you most excited about as you think about adopting this new pet?”

#### Conclusion

Taking the time to fully understand adopters’ goals will result in more solid matches—ones that result in pets staying in their forever homes. And even if the potential pet parents didn’t find the right pet today, or aren’t 100% ready to take one home, your feel-good conversations with them will make it more likely that they will come back and try again another day.

Each person who walks through the door represents a potential home for a pet in need. Every interaction is an opportunity to educate and cultivate a future adopter. If a home or the adopters are not ready, the interview will be an essential step in helping them prepare. It’s not about “yes” or “no” today; it’s about helping each person find the right pet at the right time.