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Q: My husband and I are considering adopting a senior dog from a shelter. We've heard older animals are harder to get adopted because most people would like puppies, and we would like to help. We were wondering if it is in fact, possible to teach an old dog new tricks, so to speak. Are older animals capable of being trained, or are they more set in their ways than a puppy would be in terms of behavior?

A: Rescues and shelters house wonderful dogs, one just waiting to become a member of your household. While shelter dogs come from various backgrounds and experiences, they all share one important fact: They are dogs, and the dog you choose needs to be understood and treated as such.

Any dog can be trained, regardless of his age. A well-trained dog is happier and a joy to have around. The shelter may have performed a behavioral evaluation on your dog to help you understand what, if any, potential behavioral issues the dog may have. This information is very helpful when you begin training.

All dogs need order and leadership. They seek a social pack structure, which you must provide. Your dog needs to know that you are in charge, will consistently provide for his needs, and that you have a set of house rules. This makes the transition from the shelter to your home easier, faster, and more rewarding. If a dog doesn't have a consistent set of rules to follow, then he will try to become the leader, which can create numerous behavioral problems.

Start by practicing obedience training (sit/stay/come/leash control), setting rules (e.g. he is not allowed on the furniture), and apply them calmly and consistently. Don't forget to praise your dog's good behavior and choices. Keep a leash on him for a few weeks when you are home so that you can show and guide him if he makes a mistake or has a housebreaking accident. Because dogs are den animals, provide a crate or a safe place for him to go to if there is a lot of hubbub in your home. Make a list of behaviors (e.g. jumping, food aggression) you are concerned about, and discuss how to correct them with your trainer.

Hats off to you for considering an older shelter dog! Your patience and training will help to create a bond that will reward you both for years to come. With the right balance of discipline, understanding, and affection, your rescue dog will become a loyal, grateful, and loving companion.

ABOUT the Trainer

Marlene Marks is a dog behavioral therapist and trainer with Bark Busters Home Dog Training. Chicagoland Bark Busters offers dog guardians a variety of training services right in their homes to correct behavioral issues in dogs of all ages, including puppies. Bark Busters is the only international dog training company that offers guaranteed lifetime support, which means they will provide future sessions free of charge if problem behaviors recur, for the life of the dog, even in the case of a move or new family for the dog.