

leader of the pack

Just months before our beloved dog Murray died, I remember joking with a friend that when he passed away I wanted to have him stuffed and placed in his favorite spot—by the front door in the sun with a view of the mailman, the squirrels and the kids walking home from Foster School. We had known from the moment we adopted Murray that the middle-aged, house-trained, non-shedding, leash-free, non-barking mutt with the soulful eyes could never be replaced. Three years and three dogs later, I sometimes wish I hadn't tried.

But, within two days of Murray's death, our house and our hearts were too empty to go on without a dog, so we started to scour the shelters for a new family pet. We all love puppies but agreed that adopting another adult dog was the best option. We had had incredible luck, and love, with Murray

who's in charge?

and wanted to give another needy dog a home. It was the week before Christmas, though—the busiest time of year for adoptions, according to Jolene Miklas, marketing and communications coordinator for Animal Friends—so with the exception of various pit bull mixes, the pickings were slim. We scanned www.petfinder.com for desirable dogs within driving distance, but each phone call led to more disappointment: Our preferred pups had already found homes for the holidays.

At the suggestion of my neighbor, Abby Kirkland, an experienced pet adopter and active animal advocate, we decided

to try our luck at a small private shelter near Brownsville. The first dog we laid eyes on literally stole our hearts. Already appropriately named Danny Boy, he was a small tan and white beagle mix standing *on top* of a doghouse that was the only structure in a pen full of large and ferocious looking dogs. We were “big dog” people, but what Danny lacked in stature, he made up for in personality and good looks. Little did we know that the very stance that attracted our attention—above all the other dogs—should have been a red flag.

Debbie Miller-Gurchak, professional dog trainer and owner of Hollybush Dog Training Services, explains that posturing himself physically higher than the other dogs was Danny's way of exhibiting dominance. He had clearly established himself as alpha dog within that pack and expected our family to fall in line. Although our first days at home with Danny ran smoothly, other aggressive traits began to unfold.

Miller-Gurchak calls the first two weeks with a new dog the “honeymoon period” and warns families to keep their eyes wide open. During this stage, she notes, it is not only the humans who are doing the evaluating. The new dog is working to establish his place in the pack, carefully watching body language and examining how people relate to each other and to any other pets in the home. It is crucial for family members to remain fair, firm and consistent during this phase, she says.

Kirkland, who owns three adopted dogs and one cat, agrees that is important to be consistent. “There really is no secret—I just try to find the best match for our family and the animal, and then work hard to create a consistent environment with boundaries and a routine. But there is still a certain amount of luck involved, just like with anything else.”

The Kirklands have had great success with adult lab mixes, finding them predictable and reliable. They also try to do a little homework before they adopt. “It helps to make an effort



Beth Evans tries to make an impression on canine minions adopted from shelters: Tux, a mixed breed, Daisy, a hound mix, and Boo, a bearded poodle.

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Mt. Lebanon
resident and
veterinarian
Dr. Paul Volz is
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dogs and helps out
by performing spay
and neuter surgery
at the Washington
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Society.



to know some history on the dog as well,” she says. “Good breeders, rescue [organizations] and shelters always gather as much information as possible on an animal that has been turned in, and this information can provide a baseline, enabling you to make an educated guess about whether a dog will fit into your lifestyle, and you into his.”

Adopting a dog can be a risky endeavor, but working with a reputable shelter reduces that risk. Finding the right match is the key, says Sarah McKean, who serves on the Animal Friends Board of Directors. This North Hills shelter takes lengthy preliminary steps to ensure their dogs, cats and rabbits find the right homes. Each animal gets “temperament testing,” in which a team of three trained behaviorists looks for positive traits, such as whether a dog is housebroken, is trained to sit or stay, is comfortable being handled and is trustworthy around children and other animals. They also note potential problems, such as whether a dog is overprotective of its food or toys or has a bite history. The result is a thorough report that rates the animal’s adoptability.

In addition, once a prospective pet is selected, all family members, including other pets in the home, must visit the adoptee in one of the shelter’s meet-and-greet rooms to assess mutual compatibility. This system works—an average of 82 dogs (and an additional 82 cats) are adopted each month through Animal Friends, with a return rate of only 7.3 percent.

Animal Friends requires a signed contract that the animal be returned directly to Animal Friends if for any reason the adopting family or individual can no longer care for it. The agency offers many services to encourage adoptive families to retain their new

pets, however, including obedience classes and behavioral support.

Morrison Drive resident Gina Carlos recalls her 2004 adoption of Buster, a Bernese mountain dog mix. “After the loss of Abigail, our 14-year-old Labrador, I didn’t know if I could love another dog. Even as an Animal Friends volunteer, I just wasn’t sure about bringing a shelter dog home to my children.” A prompt checkup by her trusted vet quickly convinced Carlos that rescuing Buster was the right move. Buster was declared healthy and non-aggressive, and Carlos was commended for saving an animal. He turned out to be a perfect pet, says Carlos, adding, “Once you go shelter, you can’t go back!”

Mt. Lebanon resident and veterinarian, Dr. Paul Volz, is an avid supporter of rescuing shelter dogs. In addition to his regular position at Brush Run Veterinary Clinic, Volz spends one afternoon a week at the Washington County Humane Society performing spay and neuter surgery. He says he does not observe any difference in behavioral or medical issues of shelter dogs vs. those purchased from breeders or raised at home from puppyhood. If you do not have a specific type of dog in mind, Volz suggests adopting a mixed breed, since these animals often have even temperaments and fewer breed-specific ailments.

Miller-Gurchak adds that it is a good idea to find mixes that are genetically predisposed to do the same job (such as a Labrador and a golden retriever, or a Shetland sheep dog and border collie) when adopting a mixed breed dog.

Statistics show that puppies get adopted faster. They are often too adorable to resist. But, Jean Sexauer, foster care coordinator at Western Pennsylvania Humane Society, says puppies are returned



Morrison Drive resident Gina Carlos with Buster, her Bernese mountain dog mix—an adopted shelter dog who is the perfect pet.

owner and rational thinker,” who creates the problems that exist in a family pack. Although we are still learning, our family is living proof of this phenomenon. Heartbroken by the realization that Danny Boy’s dominant, guard-dog instincts were unsafe, we contacted the shelter to help us to find him a new home. He was aggressive toward strangers, a risk we could not take in our busy household. We also understood that keeping him would have been setting him up for failure. Relocating him to a home where his disposition was actually preferred was the only real way to save him.

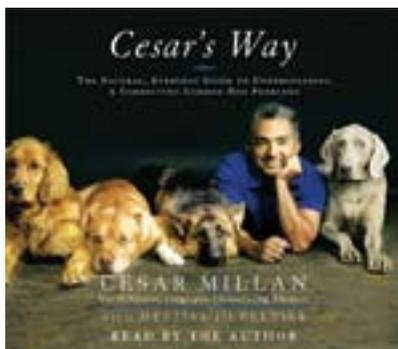
Knowing Danny had to go, we rescued Boo—a non-shedding, bearded poodle mix who slightly reminded us of our perfect Murray. We did not know (nor did we inquire) that Boo had been abused and abandoned by a man. It took a full year for my husband to be within an arm’s length of Boo. He couldn’t even stand up quickly without Boo’s escaping at warp speed to hide under a table. We took our time, pampered him, encouraged him to climb on the couch, offered him special treats and food and generally made a fuss over him. All the while, the message we were trying to send, “you are safe with us,” and the message he received, “I am the king,” were not the same. By projecting our human emotions on Boo, we were not only allowing, but actually encouraging him to take charge.

In a further effort to coax Boo into feeling safe, and to add a more approachable canine companion to our home, we adopted another dog. Enter Daisy, a hound mix with scruffy fur, amber-yellow human eyes and a basset’s bay who has, but never uses, the strength to tackle Boo with one blow if she so desires. Instead, she dig holes in the yard, tries to lick the plates as the dishwasher is loaded and opens the front door herself so she and Boo can torment the mailman. We adore them, but together these dogs were taking advantage of us all.

Finally, I am onto them. I was fooled by their wagging tails, drooling jowls and pirouettes at the sight of a leash. Though still a sucker for the uncontrollable hind leg twitch that comes with a belly scratch, the pathetic look and smell of a rain-soaked mutt, and the instinctive way they oblige by lying on your feet when your toes are cold, I have decided to take charge of the pack. Without realizing it, we had created two little monsters who fed off each other’s bad habits.

With the help of the Dog Whisperer, various books and trainer Miller-Gurchak, I am now armed with both the practical information and the determination necessary to establish myself as the real alpha dog in our family pack. Since I made changes, our days together are easier and more fun. Boo is less fearful of men and Daisy *usually* allows me to be the boss. I actually think she is relieved and is learning to relax and accept her new role as No. 2. The honeymoon is over. Our family, canine and human, is settling into a comfortable pack. Sure, there are risks in adopting a dog, but with the potential reward of unconditional love and devotion, none of us would have it any other way. 🐾

more frequently than older dogs. Families who are swept away by the cuteness factor can later be surprised by the changes in their dog’s size, the amount of food or exercise required or the need for training. Proactively, the Western Pennsylvania Humane Society offers a cash rebate to families who enroll their puppies in training classes. Like many experts, Sexauer recommends adopting an adult dog: “There is something so rewarding about the love of an adult dog. They are grateful. They know you saved them and they are devoted to you.”



Books by “Dog Whisperer” Cesar Millan and advice from dog trainer Debbie Miller-Gurchak helped Beth Evans figure out her dogs.

Other benefits of adopting a mature pet come from knowing their disposition, medical conditions, or grooming and food requirements. Mature dogs often require less exercise and supervision, assimilate easier into existing family schedules and are sometimes obedience trained.

Problems can still arise, though—and they often start with *you*. Dogs are smart. Being pack animals, they watch and wait for any opportunity to take charge. One episode of Cesar Milan’s “Dog Whisperer” will convince you it is nearly always the human, “the