The Joys and Challenges of Adopting an Animal

Adopting a pet from a shelter is a great way to find a new best friend. But it’s also a great way to make a huge difference for an animal, and potentially even save its life.

Sadly, many of the animals that end up in shelters come from bad situations. Adopting a mistreated animal can have extra challenges, but can be a great lesson in love, patience, and trust.

Kit Darling, infection control coordinator at the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, explains the benefits of adopting an animal that has been mistreated and discusses the best ways to earn its trust.

Adopting an animal can greatly improve its quality of life; an animal that has known nothing but loneliness and fear can be given the chance to feel love and safety, Darling said.

In return, these pets can provide unconditional love and support for their owners. The benefits of pet ownership may take longer, but can be just as strong in the end.

“It takes patience and consistency to gain the trust of an animal that has been mistreated,” Darling said. “It may take a
while for the animal to trust and accept your love. Go slow, take baby steps, and do not expect too much.”

At first, these animals may show signs of fear or aggression, such as cowering, growling, or shying away from touch. Some may even have an injury if they did not have time to heal at a shelter.

“Animals that have been mistreated may show significant emotional reactions to certain situations or objects,” Darling said.

She explained that fear may cause these animals to be withdrawn, unwilling to play, or have the inclination to hide. Some may also show separation anxiety when away from their new owner.

Darling recommends giving the animal a secluded, quiet place to retreat to so that the animal feels safe and secure and is not rushed into frightening situations.

She said that trust building begins by spending quiet time together on a daily basis. Speak clearly in low tones, give the animal treats, and do a quiet activity nearby to help the animal learn to trust you.

“Allow the animal to meet his new family one by one and at a pace that is not overwhelming,” she said. “If he is fearful of people or other animals, do not force interactions with them.”

Once the animal has begun to adjust to you and your household, basic training can be used to decrease any remaining fear.

“Consulting with a veterinary behaviorist or certified animal behaviorist can be helpful when dealing with mistreated animals,” Darling advised.

It can take a short or long period of time before the animal is fully comfortable with its new family. Some animals will always retain a bit of fear, but many others will fully
recover and go on to live a normal life.

“IT IS IMPORTANT TO BE PATIENT, CONSISTENT, AND PERSISTENT IN THE REHABILITATION PROCESS,” Darling said. “IT CAN BE REWARDING TO SEE AN ANIMAL OVERTAKE THEIR FEARS AND ENJOY LIFE AGAIN. IF YOU ARE WILLING TO TAKE THE TIME AND OPEN YOUR HEART AND HOME TO HELPING A NEGLECTED ANIMAL, IT CAN GIVE YOU A JOYOUS AND REWARDING EXPERIENCE.”

Pet Talk is a service of the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences. Stories can be viewed on the web at vetmed.tamu.edu/pet-talk. Suggestions for future topics may be directed to editor@cvm.tamu.edu.