

# The Unique Joys of a Mature Pet

By Rebecca Simmons

Ayla had only been with her foster parents' for a few days before they decided to make her a permanent member of the family. Gail Carissimi and her husband Jon were captivated by her affectionate and playful personality. "We knew that we couldn't let anyone adopt her," says Carissimi. "Ayla was already home."

At eight years old, the Chow/Shepard mix is just one of an increasing number of mature pets finding their way into American's hearts and homes. As people become more aware of the joys of older pets, adult animals are getting more attention from potential adopters—and for good reason.

## The Big Easy

Sure, puppies, kittens and other young animals are adorable. But just like their human counterparts, these babies require an extensive commitment of time and energy from their guardians. For many Americans, busy schedules and work commitments prevent them from being able to provide the kind of round-the-clock care that younger animals require.

For Kathy McDonnell, behavior manager at the Monadnock Humane Society in Swanzey, New Hampshire and proud pet parent of a recently adopted 10-year-old Dalmatian, mature animals fit her lifestyle. "For me, an older dog is a much better option as I work long hours and [older dogs] just don't need as much exercise and stimulation as the younger guys do. Typically, the older dogs are already housebroken and have passed the destructive chewing phase."

Not only that, but mature dogs will have likely gone through some basic obedience training and adult cats are more likely to be litter-box trained.

But don't misunderstand: Although older pets may be less demanding, that's not to say adult animals don't require pet parents to be responsible and devoted—all animals require a lifelong commitment.

## Animal Attachment

It's something that shelter workers hear over and over again from people who want to adopt a puppy or kitten: "I want a pet who will bond with my family" or "I want a pet who can grow up with my kids." The truth is that forming a strong connection with a pet has little to do with the animal's age at the time of adoption.

"Some people—especially those with young children—pass over adult dogs or cats in favor of puppies or kittens," says Carissimi. "In my opinion, if an adult animal is given a 'second chance' with a loving, adoptive family, it's very likely that she will be a trusting, loyal companion for many years."

In addition, adult animals are often a more practical pet for families with children. Bringing together young animals and kids can be problematic, as puppies and kittens sometimes exhibit playful nipping and clawing, which can injure or frighten children. And kids can inadvertently be too rough with young animals. Adopting a mature pet who interacts well with children can be the best option.

## The Awwwww Factor

While adorable kittens or pint-sized pooches have the power to seduce just about any animal-lover, it's important to remember that baby animals quickly become adults. Before giving in to the pull of a young animal, adopters need to remember that every animal up for adoption used to be a baby—and that adult animals can be every bit as sweet, cute and playful as their younger counterparts.

## What You See...

Anyone who's ever observed an infant and wondered what he would look like as an adult knows that, without meeting his parents, it would be hard to guess. In the same way, it's hard to determine what kind of characteristics a

puppy or kitten will have until the animal is an adult. In contrast, it's much easier for potential adopters to get a sense of a mature animal's qualities—including size, temperament, and personality—and to make a more informed decision based on their expectations.

### **Good Vibes**

Helping a homeless animal will always be a natural high for adopters. But those who choose to adopt an adult pet can take extra comfort in knowing that they're giving a home to an animal who may otherwise be overlooked. As they age, dogs and cats tend to have an increasingly hard time finding an adoptive family. For many adopters, giving an older animal a home is an act of compassion.

But for some, the good feelings associated with adopting a mature pet has little to do with sympathy. "I have benefited more from knowing and loving my old pets than I ever could have imagined. When I adopted my first older dog, I felt badly for her being in the adoption center at her age, and thought I was doing a good thing by bringing her home. Who was I kidding? Now I am filled with gratitude to her for sharing her appreciation for the little joys in life with me. I have learned many life lessons from knowing, loving, and being loved by these old souls" says Susan O'Kane, executive director at the Humane Society of Chittenden County in South Burlington, Vermont.

More and more animal-lovers are finding out that their perfect pet isn't a puppy or kitten but an adult animal. In the process, they're learning just how easy it is to teach an older pet new tricks—like showing their best friend how to love again.

"Though Ayla doesn't hear as well as she used to, she 'hears' our love when we scratch her ears and massage her back, says Carissimi. "As a society, we respect and honor those who have lived long lives. And so it should be for our special animal friends."