

Task 3: Learning from Mistakes

In this task, we'll analyze how mistakes often result in learning. Next, we'll consider how we can apply adult learning principles to adopter "mistakes" to turn them into positive results.

Did You Always Meet All the Adoption Criteria?

We establish adoption criteria with the intention of adopting out animals only to people who are able to provide good homes for them. That's our intention. But the results suggest we might have missed something – or someone.

➤ When asked, stand up. Your facilitator will read this list of typical adoption criteria used by shelters and rescue groups around the country. If you hear a criterion that has **ever applied to you**, sit down.

- If one of your animals was ever hit by a car
- If you had an animal that ran away from home
- If you didn't have a fenced yard for your dog
- If you've ever kept an animal without your landlord's permission
- If you've ever surrendered an animal to a shelter
- If you've had an animal that was not kept current on vaccinations

➤ How many potential adopters among your colleagues are eliminated because they (and maybe you too) failed to meet one of these adoption criteria?

➤ As you look around at the people who are seated (and would typically be denied an adoption based on these criteria), what are your thoughts about adoption criteria?

What Have You Learned from Past Mistakes with Your Animals?

➤ In pairs, tell a brief story about a time when you personally learned something about being a better pet owner as a result of a mistake you made with one of your pets.

- How did the learning take place?
- What made it possible for you to learn?

➤ What can we take from our own experiences of mistakes as learning experiences that could be applied to the adoption process?

Turning Adoption Counseling Mistakes into Counseling Successes

➤ Read the Adoption Counseling Case Story on the next page. (Your facilitator may also present the case story as a role play.)

Adoption Counseling Case Story: "Where are all the good homes?"

Tawnya is an Adoption Counselor at an open-admission shelter in the Midwest. She's worked there for two years. She was a volunteer foster parent for litters of puppies before that, and she is confident that she know a lot about raising puppies.

Maria is a young woman who has submitted an application to adopt a Lab-mix puppy from a large litter currently at the shelter. Maria loves dogs, and she is excited about adopting a puppy. Her family raised a few puppies when she was growing up, but this will be the first time she will raise a puppy by herself. She is confident that she knows enough about raising puppies to be a good adopter.

Tawnya begins the interview by verifying all the information Maria wrote on the adoption application. When asked about each item, Maria repeats what she has written on the form. Tawnya tells Maria all the supplies she will have to buy right away before taking a puppy home. Maria nods and says okay. Tawnya lists all the vaccines a puppy needs and when. Maria nods and says okay.

Tawnya lists the series of training classes Maria and the puppy should take, beginning as soon as possible. Maria says, "I grew up with dogs and puppies, so I'm familiar with training them." Tawnya says, "We recommend training classes for everybody, especially if they have a puppy. Oh, and speaking of training: You know you'll need to start house training the puppy right away."

Maria says, "Oh that won't be a problem. I know how to do that. A swat on the nose with a rolled-up newspaper when they mess up teaches them pretty quickly."

Appalled, Tawnya says, "You're kidding, right?" Maria seems confused and replies defensively, "No, I wasn't kidding. That's what my parents always did, and it worked just fine."

Tawnya says, "You should never hit a puppy on the nose – that's animal abuse." Maria is now shocked and very unhappy. She says, "It wasn't abuse! We loved our dogs – and they loved us! We *never* abused them!"

Tawnya says, "Look, you can't possibly adopt an animal from us if you're planning to use outdated training methods like that. We *only* adopt out animals to people who will treat them properly. I'm sorry, but you simply don't qualify to adopt here."

Maria says, "You mean you won't let me adopt the puppy?" Tawnya shakes her head and says firmly, "No. I'm sorry but we can't let you adopt one of our puppies. You have to meet our criteria to adopt, and I'm afraid that you don't."

Speechless and near tears, Maria leaves. Tawnya adds Maria's name and address to the DNA list, and wonders where the good homes will come from for all these puppies.



➤ With your same partner, analyze the case story using the following questions and activities.

- What do you see happening in this situation?
- Why do you think it happens?
- What could Tawnya do to improve her situation?
- Read the story again and underline all the areas where Tawnya could be doing a better job to facilitate learning for Maria.
- For each item you underlined, develop specific suggestions for Tawnya to put adult learning principles into action. Write your suggestions on sticky notes, and post them on the Suggestion Box.

Hint: Make your suggestions specific. For example: “Ask Maria to join her in a quiet space where they can sit and talk for a few minutes” versus “Make the learning environment safe” (which is not specific).

➤ As a group, we'll review and discuss the suggestions.



➤ With your same partner, describe a situation when you were counseling an adopter, and you became stuck or reactive like Tawnya. Use the following questions (and your new understanding of adult learning) to analyze your situation and how you can handle similar situations differently in the future:

1. In hindsight, what do you think was happening in your situation?
2. Why do you think it happened?
3. What adult learning concepts can you use so that future similar situations are more successful? How? (be specific)



What are the most interesting insights you've gained from these learning tasks?