

Conversational Adoption Counseling



Greetings from Beautiful Pennsylvania!



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Some of the photos used in this presentation were provided by Michigan Humane Society and Rachael Krause Photography in Bethlehem, PA.

Conversational Adoption Counseling

- What we say
- How we say it
- What we look like when we say it
- Leaves people with a positive impression of your organization, *whether or not they get a pet!*



Conversational Adoption Counseling

- Gets the information we need to make adoption decisions
- Gets it in a way that minimizes adopter stress
- Makes the adoption process more enjoyable for adopters
- WORKS



What do people think about us?

- Concerned that our pets are unhealthy and have behavior problems
- Our adoption process is too long and difficult
- Breeders are seen as the “experts” more than we are
- BUT... people who adopt pets are proud to have helped save a life!

Today's Presentation

- Why conversational adoption counseling?
- Understanding adopters
- Understanding adoption counselors
- How to ask **conversational questions** and handle responses



Do you have enough adoptions?

ENOUGH ALREADY!

How long
before I get
outta here?



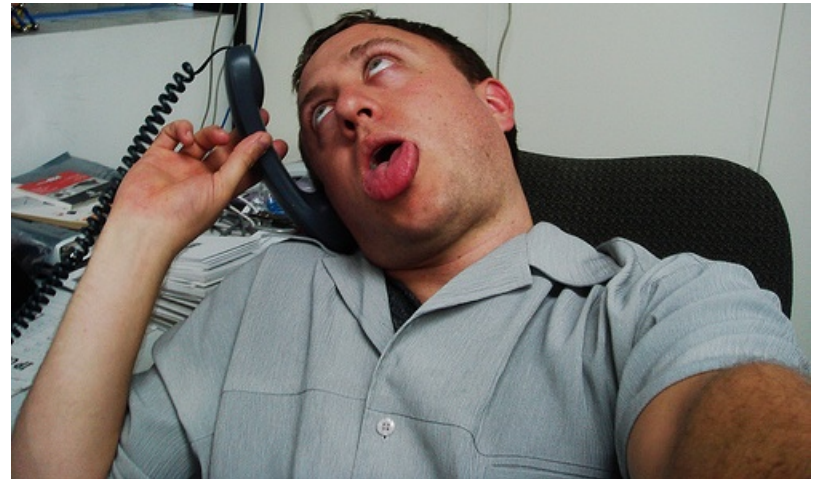
Long Stays in Your System Cause:



- Disease
- Behavior decline
- Euthanasia
- Foster program overload
- Reduced staff time per animal
- Increased cost per adopted animal
- Reduced animal intake AND FEWER ADOPTIONS!

What's Hurting Your Adoption #'s?

- Adopters who are refused
- Rude treatment on the phone, in person, or via email
- Slow response time
- Complicated process
- Long nosy forms & too many rules
- Inconvenient hours

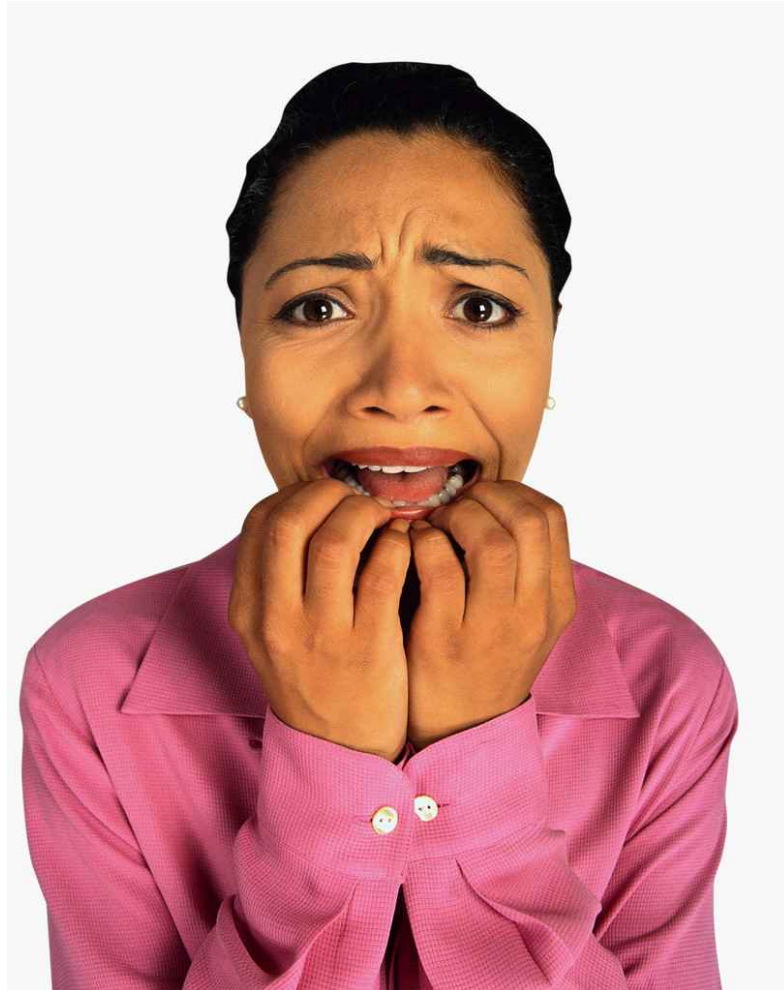


Fixing Our Adoption “Problem”



- Review Adoption Policies
- **Use Conversational Adoption Counseling**
- Market pets smarter
- Train staff and volunteers
- **Adopters Welcome**
(manual from Humane Society of United States)

Adopting a pet from us is scary!



How We See Ourselves:



How Adopters See Us:



The way we interact makes all the difference!

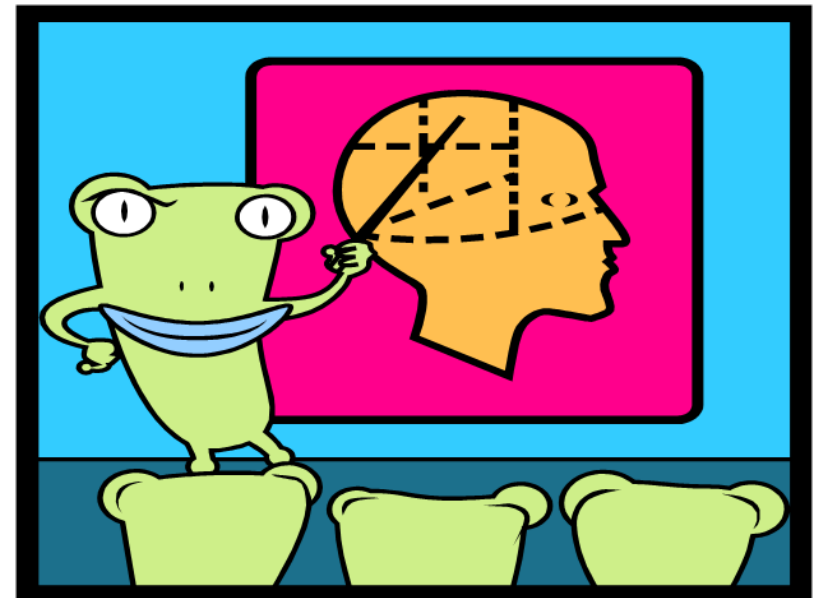
Inside the Adopter's Head



- How long will this take?
- What questions will I be asked?
- Am I being judged?
- What if they turn me down?
- Will my past be held against me?
- What happens if the pet doesn't work out?

Inside the Adoption Counselor's Head

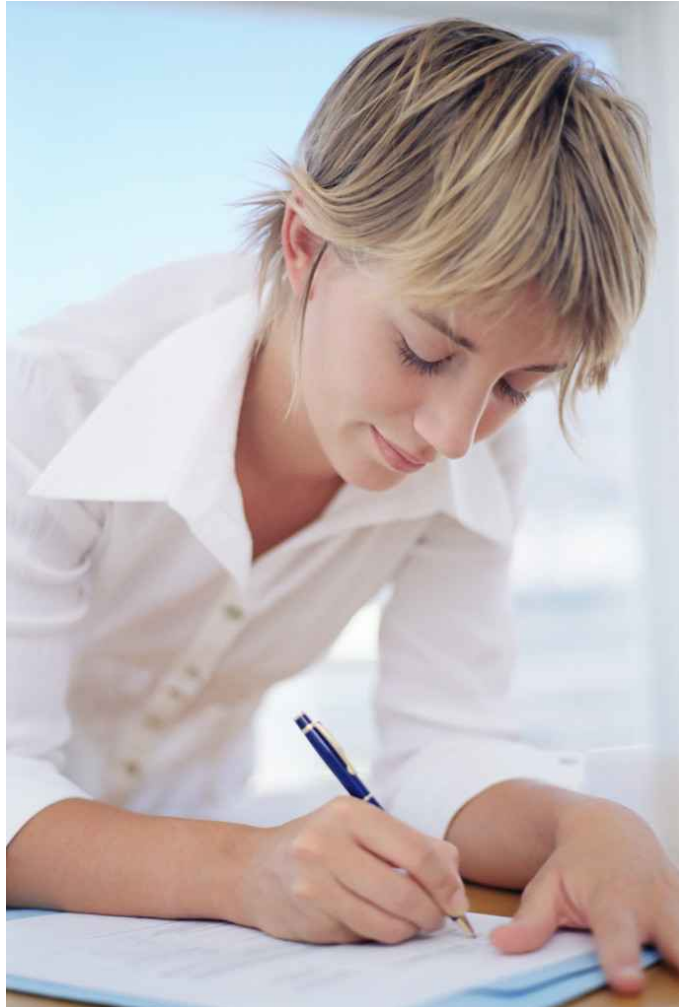
- This animal has had at least one failed home.
- I need to protect him from another failure.
- Are these people like me? Because I know that I am a good pet owner.
- I will have to ask a LOT of questions to find out.



How long is your adoption application?



How short could it be?



- Name & contact info
- Gift adoption?
- Humans in the household
- Pets in the household
- Topics you'd like to know about
- Other info you wish to share?

Could it even be (gasp!) eliminated?

- When your counselors gain experience, they may be able to rely only on the conversation
- May use a checklist of topics to ensure consistency
- Trust is built!
- People are amazed!
- Animal FLY out!



What do we **not** need in writing?

- Veterinary history
- Landlord information
- Fenced yard
- Info about past pets
- Why they want a pet
- Where they will keep the pet, what they will feed the pet, how long they are gone each day... **what color their underwear is!**



First Step: Shrink It Down!

- One page, one side maximum, faxable
- Includes a checklist for counselor's use
- Decision at bottom: Approve, Pending (reason), or Decline
- Don't ask for info twice

MICHIGAN HUMANE SOCIETY **Chesterfield OFF SITE CAT ADOPTION FORM**

Left Side - Staff use only

ANIMAL NUMBER/NAME: _____

ANIMAL Tag Number: _____

DATE: _____

Adoption Counselor Checklist:

- ☐ Evaluation Review-Medical (include breed charac)
- ☐ Evaluation Review-Behavioral
- ☐ Interaction with the animal
- ☐ Introducing new pets with resident pets at home
- ☐ Litterbox use
- ☐ Diet
- ☐ Safe handling
- ☐ Relevant Behavioral Handouts
- ☐ What to do first when bringing new pet home
- ☐ Discussing common behavioral issues
- ☐ Children and pets
- ☐ Microchipping
- ☐ Pet Insurance
- ☐ Adopter Support Line 87-PETSRLIN

Comments: _____

PetSmart Staff Member Interviewer: _____ Recommendation: Approve Decline

MHS Adoption Counselor/Staff Name: _____ Recommendation: Approve Decline Pending

Reason for pending: _____

PetSmart staff: Please fax application to 734-727-9068 attn: OAM. Then CALL 248-840-8136 for immediate attention!

Payment Amount: \$ _____ Ca. Ck. MC Visa AmEx

Animal Pick up Date: _____

Adopter: Please fill out the form below

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

CITY: _____ STATE: _____ ZIP: _____

DRIVER'S LICENSE #: _____ DATE OF BIRTH: _____

HOME PHONE: _____ WORK PHONE: _____

CELL PHONE: _____

EMAIL ADDRESS: _____

Emergency Contact for Microchips: Name: _____ Phone: _____

I have a veterinarian that my pet uses: ☐ No ☐ Yes (Name): _____ City: _____ Phone #: _____

☐ Rent ☐ Own ☐ Live with other adults

Landlord's name/phone # (if applicable): _____

☐ Type of residence: _____ Any pets allowed/any restrictions? ☐ No ☐ Yes Restrictions: _____

I have owned these animals in the past 5 years				
Pet's Name	Breed	Age	Sterilized?	Current or about to be?

I am adopting this cat for: ☐ myself ☐ my family ☐ my children ☐ friend/family

Anyone in the household allergic to cats? ☐ Yes ☐ No

How many adults in your home? _____ How many children (if their ages)? _____

Do all members of your household know that you plan to adopt a cat? ☐ Yes ☐ No

The noise/activity level in my home is: ☐ low ☐ medium ☐ high

I enjoy brushing/grooming pets: ☐ never ☐ 1-2/week ☐ daily

I would like cat who: (check all that apply)

- ☐ plays gently ☐ is fairly active ☐ plays enthusiastically
- ☐ loves everyone ☐ prefers mostly family ☐ needs encouragement with strangers
- ☐ is a cuddler ☐ enjoys lap time ☐ is more independent
- ☐ is quiet ☐ talks occasionally ☐ is a chatterbox

My cat needs to get along with: ☐ other cats ☐ dogs ☐ other _____

I have: _____ indoor cats _____ in/out cats _____ other pets _____

I need a cat that can be left alone _____ hours per day.

Where will your new pet live and sleep? ☐ indoors ☐ outdoors

My ideal cat would: _____

Bad kitty habits that I can't tolerate: _____

Please stop here. Take this form to counselor and an adoption counselor will assist you. Thank!

Goal: Make It a Conversation!



- Touch all important points
- Answer their questions
- Use great customer service

Friendly Open Conversations Relax People



- They should feel comfortable and welcomed by you
- This will encourage them to be truthful and express concerns
- Not all adopters are qualified to adopt now, but they deserve respect and good customer service

How often do people get a pet?

- Not very often!
- This is our chance to leave a positive lasting impression
- Adopters become repeat adopters, and tell friends about your organization
- Adopters become donors
- Adopters can be your best allies in the community!

Adopting a pet should be fun!



What are **adopters** looking for?

Well-adjusted healthy pet:

- Not looking for an animal who is sick
- Not looking for a dog who will destroy their couch when they leave for work
- Not looking for a cat who pees in their shoes
- Not looking for an animal who bites



What are **adopters** looking for?

Honest information!

- How big will the pet get?
- Is the pet housetrained?
- What shots has the animal had?
When are the next shots needed?
Who pays for those?
- Is the animal neutered?
- How trainable is the pet?
- Will the animal get along with my
other pets? Kids?
- How much will this cost?



Have Honest Answers and Good Pets



What are **you** looking for?

- Homes for your adoptable pets (adopt vs. euth)
- **BEST HOME** or **QUALIFIED HOME**?
 - A qualified home meets your adoption requirements
 - “Best” home implies comparing adopters and judging who is best
- Adopters want to be treated fairly:
 - First-come basis & first qualified home = FAIR
 - Judging who is best is not perceived as fair

Can you **really** judge the best home?

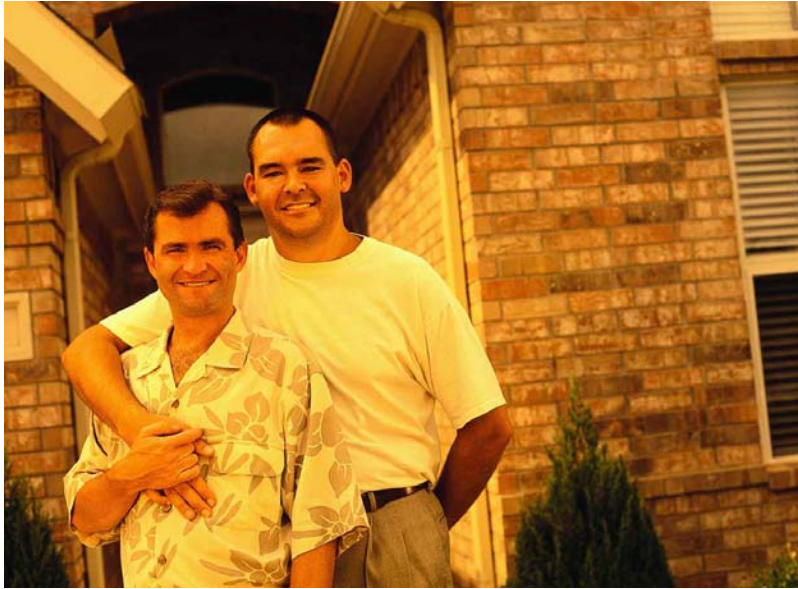


We tend to misjudge adopters who are:

- Culturally different
- Lower income
- Young or old
- Less educated about pets
- Unlike ourselves



Qualified Homes Come In All Kinds



Strive for Objectivity

- We all have built-in biases
- When we have a bad “gut feeling” we should try to determine if it has an objective basis
- If unable to find an objective reason, then it is probably subjective



Examine Your Non-Negotiables

18 years of age

Not a gift

Home owner

Landlord approves/deposit paid

Fenced yard

Pet will live strictly indoors

Must meet all family members

Solid vet care history



Peace of Mind for Your Staff

Adopter Support program

- Emails & phone calls



Behavior Assistance

- Send tips home & downloaded
- Free behavioral advice via helpline

Adoption Guarantee

- Money-back on all animals for XX days
- Not all adoptions work out! Returns are not failures!

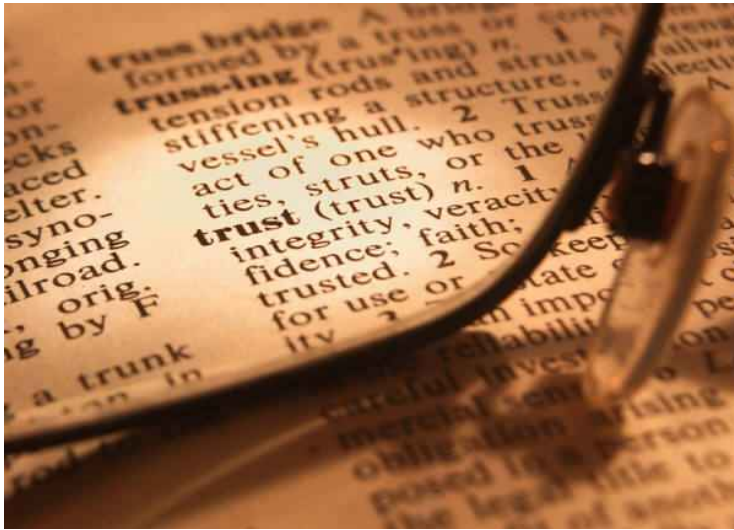
Start with a Smile



The Adoption Counselor Personality

- Friendly, open, non-judgmental
- Loves people AND animals
- Open to learning from others, as well as teaching in a non-condescending way
- Excited to be doing adoptions (not a chore)
- Volunteers often make best adoption counselors
- Mindful that we all make mistakes

Establishing Trust



Trust goes both ways

- We have to trust that MOST adopters are honest and forthright
- We also have to act in a trustworthy way
- Eye contact as you speak is important
- Listening, understanding, pausing, responding

Verbal Signals You Are Listening

“Okay! Gotcha!”

“I understand.”

“So you are saying...”



Without these types of verbal signals, you are likely to be tuned out by the adopter!



Conversation Starters

- “What a gorgeous puppy!
Are you looking for a large dog?”
- “This one is just a baby.
Have you housetrained a
baby puppy before?”
- “Would you like to hold her?”
- “What questions can I
answer about this puppy?”



In-Person Counseling vs. Phone

Benefits of Face-to-Face

- Eye contact
- Body language
- Trust building
- Observe with animal

Can you compensate over the phone? Online?

Goal: establish “friendship”



Clipboard Etiquette



Desk/Table Etiquette



Listen and Answer Questions

Check off topics covered in order of ***adopter's questions first***

For example: adopter asks about pet's shots:

- Answer their question
- Talk about next shots due
- Vets and low-cost options
- Work into worming and heartworm



Avoiding Declines

Many people are not quite ready to adopt

You want these people back when they are ready

Let them know you will be happy to work with them when:

- You have what they are looking for
- They come back from vacation
- They feel ready to replace a pet who has died

You can increase the likelihood they will return if they truly felt welcomed and respected!

Turn Declines Into Pendings!



But what about slime ball adopters?



These People Exist... But Rarely



- Being overly strict with ALL adopters is **unlikely** to tease them out
- But it WILL drive good adopters away!
- MOST adopters are coming to you for the right reasons
- Fight “shelter mentality”

Use Active Listening and Checklist

- Allow the person to tell you about past pets
- Let their conversation lead the discussion
- Respect the level of pet experience by touching lightly on topics they obviously know about
- Try not to hurry!



Over-the-Phone Adoption Counseling

Call the adopter in a timely way: within 24 hours or same day if possible

“Hi, this is Diana from the Bucks County SPCA. I’m calling about your interest in our very sweet black cat in our offsite cat center!”



Use a Friendly Open Style



- “Is this a good time to talk about the kitty?”
 - If not, find out when to call back
- Smile as you talk: they can hear the difference!
- Pause for their replies
- “Did you have a chance to take the kitty out of the cage to interact yet? How did that go?”

Handling Hurried Adopters



- Don't allow a busy adopter to short-cut your process
- Offer to call back at a more convenient time
- Estimate the time it will take on the phone
- “I want to be sure to answer your questions about this pet.”

Who are they adopting the pet for?



- Self or family
- Kids within family (sometimes gifts)
- Elderly parent(s): “Do your parents know you are getting them a pet?”
- Friend or someone outside of home (gift)
- Know how you will handle gift adoptions

www.aspcapro.org/gifts

Who else lives in the home?

- Kids (ages)
- Parents:
“Are they aware you are adopting a pet?”
- Roommates:
“Is your roommate okay with getting pet?” Do they have pets of their own?



Landlord Restrictions



“Do you know if there are restrictions on pets where you live?”

> Could call if person is unsure

Some agencies are moving to a disclaimer:

Some landlords have restrictions on pets. We recommend you check.

Current/Recent Pets

- “That must have been hard to lose your dog...”
- “Have you had a cat before?”
- Listen for clues as to their experience level
- Some people know a lot!
Avoid being a know-it-all!



Veterinary Care History

- “Are you used to taking your pets to the vet?”
- Help people overcome barriers to veterinary care
- Low-cost options, vets you recommend, booster shots, emergency care
- Avoid shaming them!



Upper Respiratory Viruses



“Animals who go through animal shelters and rescue programs are more likely to come down with upper respiratory viruses.”

“Most viruses are mild, like a human cold, and will resolve on their own, but they are contagious to other pets.”

Upper Respiratory Viruses



“Your new pet may cough or sneeze if they get a virus. As long as your animal continues to eat and drink and play normally, with only clear discharge from the nose, then okay to watch.”

“If pet stops eating or drinking, acts tired all the time, or has a green or yellow discharge from nose or eyes, then he should go to the vet.”

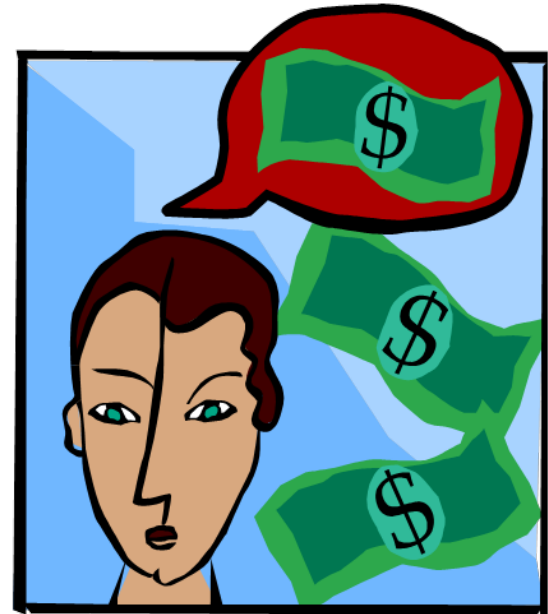
Post-adoption Vet Care



- Can you offer one free vet visit within 10 days of adoption?
- Or could you arrange for a coupon for a free introductory exam at a local vet?
- Use fast-tracking and avoid mandatory holds pre-placement

Cost of Vet Care

- Offer health insurance brochures to adopters
- Encourage adopters to set aside some money each month for pet health care so that when something happens, they will be able to pay for vet care.



Introducing to Other Pets in Home

- Some adopters will ask for dog meet-n-greets
- Supervise introduction and talk through what people are seeing
- Should not be mandatory!
- Does not necessarily predict what will happen in the home



Cats Going to Homes with Other Cats



- Do not encourage bringing cats to meet each other
- Discuss gradual introduction
- “It’s okay to keep the new cat in a small room for a few days. A room is bigger than this cage!”

Cats Going to Homes with Other Cats



- Encourage giving extra attention to existing cat
- Cat introductions will be easier if both have chilled
- **Offer 60-day guarantee**

Housetraining

- “Have you used a crate before to housetrain a dog? How did that go for you?”
- “This puppy will need to go out mid-day to potty. Will someone be home who can do that?”



Litterbox Use



- “Do you have any concerns about a new cat using the litterbox?”
- New cat: new litterbox
- Scoop daily, dump all litter weekly, sanitize box
- Not using the box? Take cat to vet!

Exercise for Dogs



- “How are you planning to exercise your new dog?”
- Fenced yards can be misused
- Large active dogs need an active owner, not necessarily “room to run”
- Good time to touch on licensing and leashes

Identification



- “Our kitties are already used to wearing a collar and tag!”
- “Are you familiar with microchipping?”
- “Microchips work sort of like barcode scanners. If a lost pet ends up at an animal shelter or vet clinic, they can scan for a chip and look you up in an online database.”

What to Feed the Pet

- “What type of food are you used to feeding your pets?”
- “Our animals all eat XYZ food. You can switch to a brand you prefer, and we’ll give you a starter bag so you can switch gradually to prevent tummy upsets.”
- Free food coupon



Allergies to Pets



- “Any pet allergies in the home?”
- Many people with allergies can live with pets
- What can you do to help them make a wise choice?

Declawing

- Some people must have a declawed cat:
immune-suppressed, elderly,
apartment
- Offer previously declawed cats
- Counseling versus
unenforceable mandate



Outdoor Pets

- “Are you able to keep this cat indoors?”
- In cases where person has indoor/outdoor or outdoor pets, talk through the specific situation
- “Could the dog/cat be kept in at night?”



Adopters Who Do Not Speak English



- Speak slowly, ask person to repeat themselves, show respect and SMILE!
- Children may be good interpreters
- Adoption counselors who speak other languages
- Handouts in other languages (also pet names)

Happy Adopters, Happy Pets

- Train all staff and volunteers in **conversational adoption counseling** to provide excellent adoption experiences
- The animals are ALL counting on us!

