

SEVEN COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ANIMAL RESCUE GROUPS

Dr Karen Machin

1. Rescues take animals no one else wants because they have behavioural problems.

“They wouldn’t be in a rescue if there wasn’t something wrong with them” is a common belief, however, most animals are just waiting for a home. In reality, animals end up in rescue because they were bred indiscriminately, meaning it was an unintended breeding or they were produced without a clear reason.

There are many reasons why animals lose their homes. People who relinquish their pets are often unprepared for the commitment or time required to take care of a pet, did not have knowledge of species-specific behaviour nor the know-how to train desired behaviour, or they did not expect the expenses associated with having a pet.^{1,2} All animals require time and effort to teach acceptable behaviour. Owners who attend obedience classes shortly after adoption are more likely to keep the dog they adopted.^{2,3} Owners with client / veterinary relationships are also less likely to relinquish a pet.⁴ Thus, veterinarians can help with this by educating owners about typical animal behavior, routine care requirements and training, and the importance of regular veterinary visits.³

Parents who relinquish a pet often have unreasonable expectations of the relationship between animal and child, “they expect the pet to teach their children to be responsible, loving, and emotionally sensitive persons”.² Tolerance toward children may be erroneously expected on the part of the pet and can result in the animal nipping, biting, scratching, growling, hiding, etc., when the interactions are not appropriate. In general, when there is lack of knowledge regarding dog behavior and safety practices for dog-child interactions⁵, veterinarians can help by educating their clients on appropriate child / pet interactions.²

Moving is also cited as a common reason for relinquishing a pet. In one study, companion animals that were acquired at no cost and were owned for less than two years were more likely to be surrendered. Young adult women also relinquished animals to shelters or rescues at a significantly higher rate than would be expected. Educational efforts that target young, potentially mobile adults could decrease the number of animals relinquished.⁴

Another source of animals in rescues is strays coming from northern spay/neuter initiatives or found animals that were never claimed. Strays or dogs that were once feral can take time to adjust to living in a home. One study found that free-ranging dogs were adaptable and while many (75%) were timid when they first arrived in the home, the majority adapted within a few weeks.⁶ The most common behavior problems reported for the dogs were hyper-attachment to the owner (59%) and escaping (32%) while housetraining and leash training were not difficult to accomplish.⁶

2. Rescues only have old animals.

Pets of all ages are found in rescues: puppies, adults, middle-aged, and seniors. The proportions of each will vary between seasons and rescue organizations. Many people believe that adopting a kitten or a puppy is ideal, however there are benefits to adopting a pet with "history." Puppies and kittens, while

cute, are a lot of work. They need to be taught appropriate behaviour and house training. Young animals can be destructive and excitable. Adopting an older pet offers fewer surprises as their size and personality are known. Older animals often have some training, and are usually gentler and more laid back.

3. Rescue organizations are just trying to make money.

A good rescue will operate as a non-profit, with any adoption fees and fundraising applied directly to helping more animals. In reality, the adoption fee seldom covers the costs incurred by the rescue and deficits are made up through donations and fundraising. Many of the animals that enter rescues have had little or no previous veterinary care and most need to be spayed or neutered, vaccinated, and microchipped, at a minimum. In addition, rescues will provide medical care for other conditions.

Many rescues will also support adopters through provision of post-adoption support for behavioural problems, and unforeseen medical problems. They will often take responsibility for the animals they adopt out by requiring adopters to relinquish their pet back to the rescue if they can no longer keep it.

4. Rescue groups make it too difficult for people to adopt.

Rescue groups work to find the right home for an animal. Animals generally have experienced at least one upheaval in their lives, and rescues want to make sure that adopters are committed to giving the animal a permanent home. When placing animals into a home, there are many factors that are taken into consideration by the rescue that can sometimes make the process seem difficult or lengthy. Many rescues are foster home-based, so the family that fostered the animal previously can provide in-depth knowledge of what the animal is like to live with. Rescues are generally looking to match the animal's personality and traits with the family's lifestyle to maximize the chance of successful placement. Energy level and exercise requirements of the pet are some of the characteristics rescues will use to determine the appropriateness of the placement. Some animals may have special needs and/or health considerations that are also taken into consideration.

One study showed that adoptions were more successful if the expectations of the adopters were met.² In addition, adopters that had existing relationships with a veterinarian had more realistic expectations.³ Ultimately, rescues want adopters to make informed decisions based on the characteristics and personality traits of the animal, that there is a lifetime commitment and that the pet will be happy, safe, secure, and part of a family.

5. Rescuers are hoarders.

Animal hoarding is a complex issue that encompasses mental health, animal welfare and public safety concerns. Animal hoarders may claim that they are a Rescue in order to avoid questions about why they possess so many animals and to deceive others into thinking their situation is under control. Animal hoarders generally do not seek veterinary care for their animals, nor do they place animals into adoptive homes. Animal hoarders often appear to be intelligent and to believe they are helping the animals in

their possession. All hoarders fail to grasp the severity of their situation, and they are often blind to the fact that their animals are suffering under their care.⁷

6. Rescue groups are against breeding animals.

Rescues are against irresponsible breeding practices. They discourage production of animals for the sole purpose of meeting the demands of the pet market. Rescues do not oppose breeders that seek to improve genetic stock by ensuring the health of the animals they produce by testing for genetic diseases and by carefully placing their animals into homes that are a match for the personality of the dogs they produce. They also appreciate those breeders who take responsibility for the animals they produce by supporting owners who encounter behavioural or medical problems and by taking back animals if owners can no longer keep the animal.

7. [Petfinder.com](https://www.petfinder.com) is a website where breeders sell pets.

Petfinder is a directory of nearly 14,000 animal shelters and adoption organizations across the United States, Canada and Mexico. It is an online, searchable database of rescued animals who need homes.

1. Diesel, G, Pfeiffer, DU, Brodbelth, D. 2008. Factors affecting the success of rehoming dogs in the UK during 2005. *Prev Vet Med* 84: 228-241.
2. Kidd, AH, Kidd, RM, George, CC. Successful and unsuccessful pet adoptions. *Psychol Rep.* 70: 547-561.
3. Kidd, AH, Kidd, RM, George, CC. Veterinarians and successful pet adoptions. *Psychol Rep.* 71: 551-557.
4. Patronek, GJ, Glickman, LT, Beck, et al. 1996. Risk factors for relinquishment of dogs to an animal shelter. *JAVMA* 209: 572-581.
5. Reisner, IR, Shofer FS. 2008. Effects of gender and parental status on knowledge and attitudes of dog owners regarding dog aggression toward children. *JAVMA* 233: 1412-1419.
6. Salgirli Demirbas, Y, Emre, B, Kockaya, M. 2014. Integration ability of urban free-ranging dogs into adoptive families' environment *J Vet Behav: Clin Appl Res* 9: 222-227.
7. Reinisch, AI. 2008. Understanding the human aspects of animal hoarding. *Can Vet J.* 29: 1211-1214.