

# **Do You Really Want a Puppy? or In Praise of the Older Dog**

By Lani Scheman

One of the more disappointing things to hear in rescue work is "I want a puppy" when interviewing new applicants. Many healthy, handsome adult dogs are currently available to be placed. Good dogs languish in shelters or foster care and many are eventually euthanized, although appropriate applications are on file, just because they are five or six years old. Because many people apply for a dog after the recent loss of a dear pet, they understandably fear facing the prospect of losing another in a few years. However, all of us should examine our values a bit deeper. Some things, such as wine, cheese, and dogs get better with age. Before passing by that muzzle with a few gray hairs on it, consider several things first:

Puppies are a lot of work. They are small and cuddly for only a few short months. There is housebreaking, obedience training, chewing, digging, and all that energy! Do you really have the time? Today's hectic schedules often demand long workdays and long commutes. Older dogs are capable of handling time they must spend alone and are much more forgiving of their owners when they are too tired for that last walk. (If you work too many hours, consider rescuing a cat!) Sometimes people discover too late that they don't have the time and energy that a puppy requires; Fido ends up at the humane society when adolescence becomes just too much. An older dog might have been an appropriate choice...

Young children and young dogs are not always a good combination. Because of all the work that puppies require, they may not be good matches for families with children under five. Babies are a lot of work, too! It can be exhausting to handle both at the same time. Sometimes, parents have hopes of teaching their children "responsibility" through the care of a pet. However, children under the age of ten are not terribly reliable in that regard and parents must assume the responsibility of pet care. An older dog can be an excellent and tolerant companion for young children without all of the work and supervision a puppy requires. A puppy can be purchased when the children are older and can both appreciate and participate in its care. Think of the changes in your own life as well. If the last time you had a pup was fifteen years ago when your last dog was a baby, you are fifteen years older yourself! You may not be as willing to go through the frustrating times with a puppy as you once were.

Chesapeake Bay retrievers, in particular, have a long adolescence, are very active throughout their adulthood, and usually don't begin acting geriatric until they are eleven or twelve-sometimes older. Older Chessies are loving and alert companions who show considerable enthusiasm for the daily activities of life. The average life span of a Chesapeake is twelve or thirteen years but with good nutrition, exercise, and veterinary care, many live to be fifteen. A person adopting a rescue Chesapeake of five may have up to ten wonderful years with that dog. And contrary to popular belief, old dogs CAN learn new tricks. There may be a few quirks to undo but, with consistent obedience, most habits are re-trainable and don't compare at all with the amount of training a fresh young pup will require. Even rescue dogs picked up as strays often have the basics. They are usually housebroken, leash broken, and know simple commands such as sit and stay. What a bargain! Before you pass by an older dog that is healthy, fit, trained, and at risk for euthanasia, ask yourself if an older dog might work to your advantage. If you adopt one, there is little chance that you'll regret it. The most rewarding words heard in rescue work are, "this is the best dog I've ever had."