



Adopting a Special Needs Pet

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Adopting a new pet is an exciting adventure. There is no shortage of dogs, cats, birds, rodents, and reptiles waiting to be found at local shelters. To find the best match, many potential adopters turn to Petfinder and Adopt-A-Pet, online listings of rescue organizations and thousands of adoptable pets.

Each individual or family looking to adopt has their own set of criteria for their new pet. Many are influenced by their childhood experiences with pets as they look for similar experiences. Others want a pet just like their neighbor's, and some have no criteria at all.

Pets come in all different sizes, colors, hair coat textures, purebreds and mixes, and varying ages. Many pets are in perfect health. Others have acute or chronic medical and behavioral issues, injuries resulting in amputations, or congenital defects that affect their vision, hearing, heart, kidneys, liver, and mobility. These are the special needs animals.

Believe it or not, there are adopters who specifically look to adopt a special needs pet. They might have grown up with a blind or deaf dog or cat, or had a dog that was injured and required a leg amputation or a wheelchair. Others have family members who are disabled so they feel drawn to rescue an animal who has a similar disability. There are also first time special needs adopters who simply fall madly in love with a needy disabled dog, cat, or other pet.

Years ago when there was no internet, people with special needs pets might have felt isolated. There were very few supportive resources focused on caring for animals with disabilities. Now, social media offers pages dedicated to blind pets, deaf pets, paralyzed pets in wheelchairs, diabetic pets, senior pets, and a whole host of other categories. These supportive groups and organizations allow families to share experiences, learn, and gain confidence as they care for, accommodate, and love their special needs pets.

Adopting and caring for a pet with special needs offers rewards far beyond what most people imagine. Yes, depending on the nature of the disability, it is likely that families will have to adjust their lifestyle to some degree to accommodate their special pet. But once that animal becomes part of the family, the extra effort needed to care for their special needs is completely overshadowed by a most rewarding experience.

In March of 2017 my husband and I agreed to foster a tiny deaf and blind doxie chihuahua mix rescued from a hoarding situation in Georgia. He wasn't our first special dog but he certainly was the most profoundly disabled dog we have cared for. The first few weeks were overwhelming as he was a very anxious puppy. When he was upset, he would scream for hours at a time. But once he started to settle down, we were able to sort out accommodations,

training methods, and his daily routine to the point that his anxiety improved and the screaming ceased. We formally adopted Piglet 2 months after he arrived as a foster.

We talk to Piglet even though he can't hear. His tap signals have become second nature and we even find ourselves using these tap signals when communicating with our other dogs. Piglet's mapping skills are well developed so he adapts quickly to new environments around town and when we travel.

Our main concern, of course, is that Piglet stays safe. We use gates, keep doors closed, and our furniture layout doesn't change. Piglet walks using a harness and leash just as a blind person holds the handle on their guide dog's harness. We help Piglet up and down over curbs and around obstacles in his path.

Piglet sticks to his daily routine and he makes sure we do as well. He is completely engaged with his family, friends, home environment, and all the places he visits regularly. He loves to do tricks with his dog pack and is an expert at sitting and posing for pictures. Given his limited ability to process incoming stimuli, at times, when he becomes overwhelmed with new people and places, he turns things off and takes a nap break in our arms. We are always respectful of Piglet's limitations and special needs but we feel that exposing him to varied settings and socializing him with friends enhances his world in a positive way.

Special needs dogs like Piglet enjoy friendships and interactions with people and dogs. Piglet has a unique relationship with each of his 6 "sibling" dogs and his human family members. Depending on his mood, he seeks out specific individuals to play with him or to relax with. His ability to communicate with others is outstanding and we rarely have to guess what he's trying to tell us.

While Piglet does require extra consideration and planning, he adds a dimension to our lives that we could never have anticipated when we agreed to foster him. Through his social media outreach, we have broadened our rescue network as well as our circle of friends. And we are able to educate, advocate, and fundraise for special needs pets like Piglet.

We hope that the next time you are looking to adopt a new dog or other pet, you'll consider one with special needs.

Melissa Shapiro, DVM is the owner of the Visiting Vet Service, a small animal house call practice offering custom in home veterinary care to dogs and cats in lower Fairfield County. She is also mom to 7 rescued dogs and 3 rescued birds. This menagerie includes a number of very special needs pets. Piglet, the deaf blind pink puppy is the most profoundly disabled of the group. To learn more about adopting and caring for special needs pets, visit Piglet's website, pinkpigletpuppy.org and Instagram page [@pinkpigletpuppy](https://www.instagram.com/pinkpigletpuppy), or contact Dr. Shapiro directly by email, pinkpigletpuppy@gmail.com.