



*The Pet Rescue Foundation*

## **Helping Homeless Pets: Projects For Kids and Moms**

By Judy Lee Jenkins

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Congratulations! It's great that you and your family want to help homeless animals. Cats and dogs in shelters need a voice, and every little bit you can do makes a difference.

Community service in animal welfare can introduce your children to the concepts of volunteering, helping others and developing compassion--and be fun and rewarding at the same time.

### **FAMILY DISCUSSION**

Be sure to include family discussions in every phase of your project. Invariably questions will arise, and some hard issues will need to be discussed. You can strengthen your family bond and help animals at the same time by expressing your feelings and helping your children explore theirs, too.

#### **PREPARATION**

##### **Family Pet Profile**

Before you turn to your community animal shelter, take a look at your own family pet profile.

Is your companion animal altered? Being a responsible pet owner means looking at this issue closely. Every pet that is spayed or neutered helps to save homeless animals' lives. There are important medical reasons to get your animal altered as well. For a more in-depth look at spaying and neutering, [click here](#).

Why is spay/neuter critical? If your family pet has a litter of babies, that affects your local animal shelter, even if you find good homes for all of the offspring. That's because every puppy or kitten you allow to be born takes a home away from an animal already alive! Those people who provide homes for your pet's litter could instead give a home to a shelter animal. Spay/neuter surgery for your own companion animal is an extremely successful way of reducing shelter overpopulation and euthanasia.

Has your dog been to training school? How does a dog training class help homeless pets? Hundreds of dogs are surrendered to shelters each year for behavior problems. Unless the shelter has a behavioral rehabilitation department, the chances of that untrained dog finding a new home are slim. You can enroll your dog in a class (where your kids can help too) even if she/he seems fine. All families and their dogs can benefit from more training and socialization with other dogs. Dog training with your children helps expose your family to healthy issues such as boundaries with love, compassion for others, patience and the benefit of positive reinforcement.

Perhaps you can sign up for dog school with another family and the kids can practice together, even start a club and attend dog obedience shows when they get more advanced. For advanced dog training skills, look for an agility class or, for high-spirited dogs, a fly ball class.

### **Animal Shelter Profile**

It's good to get acquainted with your local shelter so you can better determine how you can help.

One way to start is by making some phone calls. Direct your call to the education or public relations department. You may want to first review other sections in this website, especially [How To Choose An Animal Charity](#). This will acquaint you with the animal welfare jargon and give you an idea of additional questions to ask. Listed below are some of the basics:

1. What percentage of the shelter's animals are adopted? What percentage are euthanized and for what reasons? Does the shelter have a "no-kill" policy?
2. Does the shelter have a spay/neuter clinic? If not, are the animals spayed or neutered before adoption?
3. Does the shelter accept junior volunteers? If so what are the age and parental involvement requirements?

4. Is there an education department and what types of programming do they offer? School visits? Materials for the teacher? Children's classes? Guided tours of the shelter?

5. What kind of community support could best help the shelter animals?

6. Does the shelter have any of these supplemental programs: foster care, behavior modification or aiding pets in rental housing?

### **Shelter Visit**

Finally, pay a visit your local shelter, SPCA or Humane Society and see which pets are homeless in your community. Confirm the hours of operation and bring your camera (video, still or digital). As you tour the facility, count the number of adoptable dogs and cats. Do the cages have easy to read signs with personal information about the pets? Are the enclosures clean and large enough? Is the staff helpful and available? If you have more than one shelter to visit you can create a chart to compare the shelters.

### **ACTIVITIES**

#### **Dog Treat Bake-Off**

As you tour the facility, find out if the shelter dogs are on a strict diet and/or if the shelter would allow their dogs to have treats. A fun, easy way to help would be for you and your family to bake dog treats. Most pet stores sell a pre-made mix you can bake at home. Giving the dogs yummy treats can be more than a fun family outing. If shelter staff will work with you, you can actually help the shelter dogs get homes faster by using your treats to teach the dogs to sit (an impressive doggy attribute for a potential adopter). In addition, you can suggest to the shelter that your visit could be a good publicity opportunity ("8-year-old does good deed for dogs") that could draw attention to the shelter's abandoned animals awaiting new homes.

#### **Spay/Neuter News**

One way to help with spay/neuter in your community is to spread the news about its importance. You and your children can collect information about the benefits of spay/neuter along with information about your local low-cost spay/neuter clinic. The children can make up flyers promoting spay/neuter (including information about the spay/neuter clinic). Then, have them pass out the flyers as they survey their peers, extended family members, relatives or neighbors to find out how many of them have pets and how many are altered. Record how many people decide to alter their pets after hearing your information. If you send us a report about your survey and its results, we'll make you an honorable member of the All-Maddie Team and send you a free Maddie's Fund t-shirt.

#### **Home-Sweet-Home**

Can we help shelter animals find new homes if we can't adopt one ourselves? Absolutely!

As you toured the shelter, undoubtedly you found an animal you'd really like to help; a dog or cat you and your children really related to.

Try to get a cute photograph and if possible a video of this friendly dog (let's call him "Sammy") interacting with your kids in a "get acquainted" adoption area. Find out about the shelter's adoption policies; do they require landlord approval for renters? What are any other requirements that must be met before adopting from this shelter? Will "Sammy" be altered before adoption? All this can help prepare you for the next step: finding Sammy the right home.

Make a list of Sammy's personality and physical traits. Look on the Internet for rescue organizations where you could list Sammy with a photo. The Internet has tons of resources to help match people with rescue animals, and your kids can get creative on the Internet.

Make a few posters using lots of positive adjectives to describe Sammy. Put these up in your community, ask local stores if you can post them in a visible location. And just start talking about Sammy and what you've learned about him.

You can place an ad in the newspaper to generate interest in Sammy. Perhaps the shelter has a foster program that allows long-term animals to go to a temporary foster home. If you can bring Sammy home, clean him up, maybe take him to a training class, he will become more adoptable. Some folks want to rescue a dog/cat but are fearful of going to a shelter to look for one. Offer to bring friends to see Sammy in the shelter.

### **Pass-It-On**

How can education help homeless dogs and cats? Once you and your family have gotten acquainted with the world of animal welfare and the issues that surround it, you can spread the word. Ask your children's teacher if you can visit the class to talk about your trip to the animal shelter. Depending on the age of your children, help them to prepare and present the material you have uncovered about animal shelters, spay/neuter and of course Sammy. Don't be discouraged if your efforts don't have immediate results. Education, especially within a peer group, can be extremely effective, even if you don't see immediate changes. You will be helping save lives, just by discussing all this information with your children's class, your extended family and friends.

### **Fun Fundraisers**

We want to help but the emotional charge of getting involved with a specific animal is too hard--what can we do? All shelters need help fund raising. You can support the shelter by organizing a mini fundraiser. A bake sale/garage sale can be fun and raise money and awareness simultaneously. You can have your spay/neuter info flyer and

Sammy's poster on hand. Likewise, a car wash or dog wash (on a sunny day) could raise money to support the shelter.

Again, you can suggest to the shelter that your fundraiser could be a good publicity opportunity ("8-year-old raises money for abandoned animals"). Many groups have created a fundraiser that incorporates their favorite activity and collecting pledges; each lap the kids swim, each board broken in a karate class, each goal scored at a sporting event. You get the idea: think of an activity your kids love and set up a fundraiser around it. You can also find out about the shelter's own fundraiser and volunteer to help with this event.

### **Letters to the Editor**

How can you combine a school project with helping animals? An activity for older children is to write a letter to your local newspaper. Ask the shelter staff if there are any current issues they want help with. Perhaps the shelter needs funding for a feral cat fix program or needs more money to medically treat sick and injured shelter animals. Try to find an issue that your family feels passionate about. Help your child write the letter, keep it brief and to the point. Enclose a cover letter from you describing the preparation and research you've done and why you'd like to see the paper print this letter. Seeing your letter printed in the newspaper can be exciting and empowering for your family.

And finally. If one person decides to neuter their cat at your suggestion, that will make a difference. If one family signs up for a dog training class instead of giving their exuberant dog away, that will help. If more people visit their shelter and begin to think of it as a viable location to adopt their next pet that will help. All these little steps will make a difference in homeless animal's lives.

**About the author:** Judy Lee Jenkins, M.A., directed the Humane Education Department at the San Francisco SPCA for fourteen years. Judy is currently consulting for a variety of animal shelters in northern California.