

PHOTOGRAPHY TIPS

Photographing animals in a shelter environment isn't always easy, but these tips can help you get the best possible shots. The following tips are generally geared to those shooting with an SLR camera. If you're using a phone, jump down to the section on phone photography.

LIGHT - Light is the most important aspect of photography, and the reason it works. If you've ever wondered why your photos are blurry, light is your culprit. In low light, photos can be blurry when an animal moves even an inch. And "low light" might not seem all that low to your eye, but to a camera, even what seems like a well-lit room can cause you trouble. Unless you're near a window, photographing indoors can be very difficult. So, if your photos are dark and/or blurry, go near a window (or outside) to brighten things up. Whether inside or out, try to keep sunlight behind you and in front of your subject but be aware how bright sunlight can affect your photos. Nicely shaded areas (or a cloudy day) usually provide easier (and nicer) light to work with. At Best Friends, we generally avoid using direct flash in photos, especially adoptable portraits. Shooting in brightly lit areas is almost always better than using a direct on-camera flash with animals. You will usually have problems with "green eye" when a direct flash is used. If you have a hot shoe flash, [bouncing your flash off the ceiling](#) behind you produces the best artificial indoor light. If you don't have a hot shoe flash, shoot closer to a window (if possible) without a flash at all. If you are in dark, indoor conditions and need to use direct flash, consider putting a little bit of Kleenex over the flash to diffuse the light. Sounds crazy but can work wonders!



Direct flash, no diffusion.
Notice the harsh shadows
and green eyes.



Simple diffusion with Kleenex
over flash.
Softer light, no green eye.



Another lighting tip that can make a huge difference in the quality of a photo is finding the catchlight in an animal's eyes. The catchlight is that little speck of white. If you can't see any, move closer to a window, re-adjust your flash, or try to get the animal to look up more into the light. The photos below are practically the same shot, but the one on the right has the catchlights in the eyes (because her head is ever-so-slightly upturned toward the light) and makes for a more engaging photo.



EYE CONTACT - It's probably the most important thing to feature in a photo to help get an animal adopted. But especially in a shelter environment, where there is stimulation everywhere and attention spans are short, getting eye contact can be a tall order. The quickest and easiest way to get an animal to look directly at the camera is to hold a toy or treat just barely above the camera lens. Try to hold it **yourself**, because if someone else holds it, the animal will look at them instead of the camera. If you can't get an animal to look at the camera with a treat or toy, try making funny noises. Don't be embarrassed. Pant like a dog, meow like a cat, squeal like a pig. Obviously pay attention to an animal's body language and make sure you aren't scaring your photo subject, but usually a well-timed weird noise can produce pricked ears, an inquisitive look, and if you're lucky, perhaps even the illusive and adorable head-tilt.

Also try to get dogs to "smile." Some dogs just won't, but if you are patient, a smile will usually sneak in before too long. It's worth the wait if you have time! While both photos below are completely acceptable, the dog obviously looks happier in one.

SMILES



FRAMING THE SHOT - Always check your background. Try not to use a cluttered background because it distracts from your subject and makes pictures too busy. Don't take pictures where the background is filled with crates, fencing, cages. Sometimes you can't get around it, but as a general rule we try to not to get photos with these things in them.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

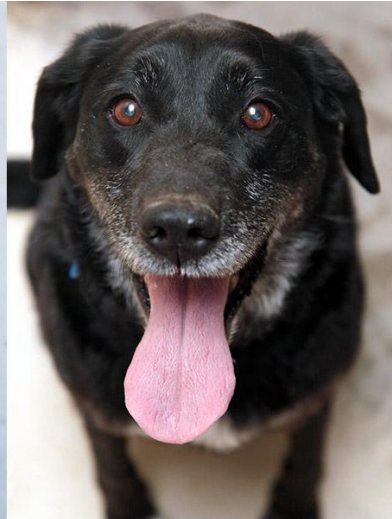
Try to take the animal outside the kennel if possible. Clean or neutral backgrounds keep the focus of the picture on the animal. Avoid backgrounds filled with crates, fencing, cages or clutter. Sometimes you can't get around it, but as a rule we try to not to get photos with these things in them. When possible, use grass or a colorful pet bed as a background. In shelter kennels try to minimize unappealing backgrounds.



dog outside on grass



dog outside on cement



dog in kennel with dirty background minimized

For cats in kennels, avoid litter boxes and messy food in photos.



All these cats were photographed in shelter kennels, but you might not know it, because background is minimized.

If photographing with people, try to get people's faces on about the same level as the animals. When the faces are far apart, the animal becomes a much smaller part of the picture (like when a person is standing straight up, and a dog is on the ground... there's a million miles between their faces). Ask people to kneel next to a dog or hold it up if it's a small dog. If it's a cat, see if the cat will tolerate being held up a little higher, as opposed to sitting on a lap (though laps are fine for plenty of photos, just not really if you're trying to get a person's face in the shot too).

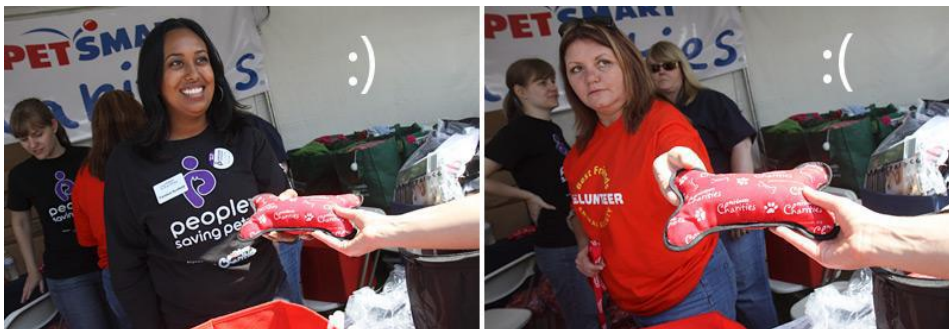
Carry dog treats with you, but always ask first if you can give them to a dog (as many have special diets). Having treats may help a dog pay attention to you, if you are looking for eye contact in a photo.

Even just changing your height can drastically alter a photo. Try shooting from near the ground, for a dog's-eye view and see how it changes your background. You can get a much better idea of what the animal is like if you get down on their level. Get corgi low!



Don't be afraid to compose your shots. Talk to the people you are taking a picture of. Most times they will be more than happy to move to a pretty location to get a picture taken.

SMILES



PHONE PHOTOGRAPHY

“The best camera to have is the one that’s with you all the time,” goes the adage. And for most people, the only camera they have with them is their phone. Luckily, iPhones (and other smartphones) these days can take nice photographs, but you still have to work to get the best shots. Here are some tips that can help make your iPhone photos better.

Clean the lens - Your phone is probably usually in your pocket or purse, where it can come into contact with all sorts of things. Unfortunately, a tiny little smudge on the lens can create a big blurry smudge on a photo, so take five seconds and wipe off the lens with your shirt before photographing.

Light - Light is the most important aspect of photography, and with camera phones it is especially sensitive. The lower the light, the grainier and poorer quality photos become. It is especially hard with animals who are moving... in low light, photos will be blurry when an animal moves even a fraction of an inch. Unless you're near a window (or in a very well-lit space), photographing indoors with your phone is very difficult. So if your photos are dark and blurry, go near a window (or outside) to brighten things up. Whether inside or out, keep sunlight behind you and in front of your subject.

Zoom in with your feet - DO NOT use the zoom on the camera phone. If you want to take something close, actually walk up to it to get closer, then click. Phone photos become very poor quality with even a tiny bit of zooming.

How to get animal eye-contact

The quickest and easiest way to get an animal to look directly at the camera is to hold a treat just barely above the camera lens (like an inch). Hold it **yourself**, because if someone else holds the treat, the animal will look at them instead of the camera. If you can't get an animal to look at the camera with a treat, try making funny noises. Don't be embarrassed. Pant like a dog, meow like a cat, squeal like a pig. Obviously pay attention to an animal's body language and make sure you aren't scaring your photo subject, but usually a well-timed weird noise can produce pricked ears, an inquisitive look, and if you're lucky, perhaps even an adorable head tilt.

Framing the shot

When framing your shot, keep in mind what is in the background of your photo. Phone cameras are naturally very wide and tend to show the background a lot more than traditional cameras. Backgrounds are just as important as the subject of a photo and can help set the scene. Even just changing your height can drastically alter a photo. Play around and get that litter box outta the shot!