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### Canine Cupid

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By Nicky Findley »

LONELY hearts looking for love in Bournemouth are literally being encouraged to "take the lead" on their first date and enjoy a bit of "petting" too.

For a new introduction agency has teamed up with a national animal welfare charity to launch a joint venture called Dates With Dogs.

Members of Top Match are now being invited to enjoy their first date walking a rescue animal from one of the Dogs' Trust's re-homing centres.

And it's not as barking as it sounds. Latest research by psychologist Dr June McNicholas reveals that a canine companion can be conducive to romantic encounters. (Well it worked for Roger and Anita in 101 Dalmatians!) "Pets can help health and happiness in human relationships through their ability to create social interaction and conversation between people who may not have an apparent common interest," she explains.

"You can also tell a great deal from a person's character by how they interact with animals which can bring out nurturing qualities in both women and men.

"Many women fall in love with their vet because of their caring characteristics."

And Dr McNicholas says there are many ways your pooch can help to make you look good in front of a potential suitor too.

"Most dogs will wag at the sound of a friendly tone so you don't need to say anything clever to look good in front of your date," she explains.

"You can also teach a dog to do a paw-shake, walk to heel or even bark on command at key moments during your doggy date."

She adds that animals tend to be good judges of character too.

"They are "silent psychologists" if you will, and there's no doubt that you can tell a lot about a person when faced with a poo-bag situation!"

So can we expect a few cases of puppy love across Dorset this summer?

Liz Green, director of Top Match in Bournemouth certainly thinks so.

"When I first met my husband five and a half years ago we would spend many of our dates in the early days walking his dog for miles together," she says.

"I think dogs make a great ice-breaker which is why I thought Dates with Dogs was such a good idea.

"The combination of an enthusiastic canine companion,

exercise and fresh air plus the knowledge that you are benefiting animals waiting to be re-homed, provide ideal grounds for romance."

Liz adds that around 99 per cent of their members are animal lovers.

"Doggy people are highly sought after as partners with around 20 per cent of Top Match singles having a 'non-negotiable' on liking pets."

Clarissa Baldwin is chief executive of the Dogs' Trust which cares for over 16,000 stray, unwanted and abandoned dogs each year through its network of 17 rehoming centres across the UK.

"We've always advocated the social benefits of owning a dog and our experience suggests that dog walking is easily addictive," she says.

"By their very nature dogs are pack animals and social creatures, therefore walking the dog and being outdoors is certainly conducive to meeting other fellow walkers, striking up conversations and friendships along the way.

"If people would like a dose of dog, but don't have a suitable lifestyle or home environment, then dog lovers can get their dog fix by volunteering to be a dog walker at one of our 17 centres across the UK."

For more information visit [dogstrust.org.uk](http://dogstrust.org.uk)