

Peer Reviewed

Helping Rescue Dogs Transition to New Homes

Many of my clients get rescue or shelter dogs and need help transitioning these animals to their homes. What are some useful suggestions I can give them?

Unfortunately, many dogs that are relinquished to shelters or rescue groups have difficulty adjusting to new homes and end up being returned. Some basic reasons behind the initial relinquishment include:¹

- The first owner fails to enroll the dog in an obedience class.
- Owner does not understand need to provide adequate veterinary care.
- The dog is not neutered.
- The owner fails to anticipate husbandry and daily care needs.
- House soiling on a regular basis is a persistent problem.

LOOKING AT RELINQUISHMENT MORE CLOSELY

Certain behavior problems commonly reported by owners of dogs from a rescue shelter include fearfulness (68%).² More specifically dogs that were initially stray dogs were more likely to display persistent straying activities, and adopted puppies exhibited more unacceptable problems than did juvenile or adult dogs. In addition, adopted juvenile dogs engaged in excessive barking while adopted adult dogs often showed aggression toward other dogs.² These data indicate that certain behavior problems play a signifi-

cant role in an owner's decision to relinquish a dog in the first place.

THE GOOD NEWS

Many of the undesirable behaviors exhibited by an adopted pet can be resolved through behavior modification/intervention. Some behaviors, such as straying and roaming activities, may become less problematic if the dog is neutered. If owners understand the various options available to counteract undesirable behavior, the adopted dog has a greater chance of becoming a viable member of the household. Shelter dogs need time to become acclimated to their new home, and owners should be patient and not rush the transition process.

WORKING WITH THE VETERINARY TEAM

It is important that owners establish good communication with their dogs' veterinarians and the entire veterinary team. The veterinary staff is a valuable source of support for owners of rescue or adopted dogs, providing proper medical attention, a complete physical examination, vaccinations, heartworm and fecal testing, and any other routine clinical tests. In addition, the initial visit to the primary veterinarian is a perfect time to discuss how neutering or spaying an adopted dog is a good health and behavioral decision.

The veterinary staff is a valuable source of support for owners of rescue or adopted dogs, as well as the health care link in ensuring that the dog receives proper medical attention.

CONTINUES

ACCLIMATING ADOPTED DOGS

Individual dogs will vary in how quickly they adapt to new conditions. Initially some may show fearful body postures and facial expressions, skittishness, decreased appetite, and tendencies to hide. Others may initially show inhibited behaviors with personality and temperament emerging later as they adjust to their new environment. This is often called the *honeymoon period*.

Environment

Providing a safe, comfortable location for the dog can help minimize fear and anxiety. The area should be visible to family members but secluded enough so the dog feels safe. Providing a bed or crate may be useful, but some dogs may feel threatened with confinement in a crate and react with considerable anxiety and stress. Therefore, it's important that owners work with the dog to build an environment where it feels secure.

Handling

Owners should resist the temptation to overwhelm the dog with lots of attention or new experiences. For example, petting and stroking probably should initially be limited to short sessions, and mealtimes should be calm, quiet, and undisturbed.

Daily exercise and activity are essential not only for the physical health of the dog but also for its

mental well-being. Leash walks and activities that involve favorite toys should be encouraged.

Supervision & Discipline

Physical punishment is not a viable option for building a healthy relationship based on trust. If the dog is unruly or difficult to supervise, for example, the use of a leash and perhaps a head collar indoors allows the owner to maintain adequate control without inflicting physical punishment. Likewise, supervision coupled with clear rules and perhaps some restrictions can help the pet learn how to behave in the home. Teaching a simple, basic obedience task such as "sit" allows the owner to request compliance in completing a task before the dog is rewarded with access to things they want or need and encourages proper responses. Other dogs may benefit from enrollment in a training situation based on positive training techniques.

TO ADOPT OR NOT TO ADOPT?

Families often want to add another dog to their home and may seek out a new companion from a shelter or rescue group. In many situations, adding a new dog goes well, but as studies have indicated, disruptions and conflict can occur.

In multiple-dog households, owners should make sure that each dog has its own bed, food, and

CONTINUES

Providing a safe comfortable location when the dog is first introduced to its new surroundings can help minimize fear and anxiety.

House Soiling: Intervention Techniques



PUPPIES

- Puppies and young dogs need to be continually supervised and frequently taken outdoors to an appropriate elimination location.
- If elimination does not occur, then the puppy or young dog should be brought indoors for 15 to 30 minutes, followed by repeat outdoor access to the appropriate elimination zone.
- Praise should be given immediately for eliminating in the correct spot. If the puppy or young dog eliminates indoors, quickly clean up the mess without inflicting punishment.

ADULTS

- Although adult dogs can wait longer periods without needing outdoor access, if they engage in house-soiling, then direct supervision is key.
- Owners should pay careful attention to subtle signals that the dog needs to eliminate, such as restlessness or acting uncomfortable, and should be encouraged to read more about housetraining from reliable sources.³

water bowl, preferably separate from the other dogs. A new dog may feel at a disadvantage and initially respond with mild aggression, such as growling, snarling, and barking. Owners should watch for early signs of anxiety or discomfort and calmly create space between the dogs to diminish negative responses. If outright fighting occurs, intervention by a veterinary or applied animal behaviorist is warranted as soon as possible.

Regardless of whether the dog is in a single-dog environment or shares the household with other pets, careful attention to the emotional reaction of the new pet, calm and measured exposure to new people and places, as well as predictable routines can help newly adopted dogs adjust to their new homes.

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references & suggested reading.

Modifying Fearful Behavior

Fearfulness can develop when a dog is exposed to a myriad of new stimuli without the opportunity to become comfortable with each new item before the next one is presented. Owners should resist the urge to take their new pet everywhere and introduce them to everyone immediately.

Rather, it is important for owners to ensure that the stimulus intensity remains low to moderate. If the dog is subjected to a new stimulus (eg, new activity, new person) and shows signs of anxiety, such as lip licking, lowered body posture, or excessive panting, the owner should immediately disengage contact between the stimulus and the dog.

Learning what stimuli produce negative reactions is important so the dog's reaction can be better managed in the future. For example, fearful or anxious reactions may become evident during interactions with certain family members. These reactions should not be ignored but instead monitored carefully to better understand the dog's mental and emotional state and channel positive rewards accordingly. Owners should also associate a new item, place, or person with positive experiences by using food or play rewards.

If the fear or anxiety persists, owners should discuss with their veterinarian the role of pheromones in controlling this behavior and whether consultation with a veterinary behaviorist is advisable.

- **Be patient;** give the new pet time to adjust.
- **Offer** a safe haven—a quiet location with all the things the dog needs (food, water, and resting area).
- **Slowly introduce** the pet to new places and people:
 - ▶ Keep the intensity low.
 - ▶ Associate the new activity with toys, food, and praise.
- **Be aware** of the honeymoon period; the dog's temperament and behavior may change over time.
- **Seek out professional help** if the adjustment becomes problematic.

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