

Adopter's Guide to Rescue Dogs

What to do and expect in the first few months

By Ruth Hegarty, M.S.E., Dog Trainer
in association with Animal Rescue Konnection (ARK)



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Dear Adopter,

First, you are a Dog Hero! You have taken a very special rescued dog into your home with the intention to make him a member of your family. Sure, dogs get adopted every day, but you know what else happens every day? Adopted dogs get surrendered back to the shelter because very well-intentioned adopters like you don't have the resources to set themselves and their dog up for success. I want to equip you with the information you need to be the highly responsible dog guardian I know you want to be for your newly adopted dog. This guide is the place to start!

I want to stress two points right up front: (1) **Having a dog is a big responsibility not unlike having a child.** It's a partnership for life that provides a lifetime of enjoyment. It requires a commitment of time, energy and resources to earn the coveted title of Responsible Dog Guardian (a.k.a. Dog Mom or Dad). It's worth it AND it takes work. (2) Your dog relies on you to provide EVERYTHING for him. At a minimum, you must provide sufficient food and water, safe and adequate shelter, regular and emergency veterinary care, exercise and obedience training. The best dog parents also provide physical and mental stimulation and enrichment, lifestyle training, daily walks, socialization with people and other dogs, treats and tons of love and attention.

I want you to know there will likely be a moment (maybe more than one) when you feel overwhelmed and even question if adopting a dog was the right choice for you. Don't panic! This is a natural part of the process of rescuing a dog. Everyone goes through it. Many people even experience these feelings after having a baby. This guide includes resources on what to do when you have those moments.

We're not trying to scare you here, just impress upon you that, at least in the beginning, your dog may feel more like work than fun. That's why we've created this guide. It contains advice and resources you need to welcome your new dog into your family and set both of you up for long term success.

One more note before we dive into the tips and resources. That is that I get it. I adopted a rescue dog years ago who challenged me in so many ways. As the saying goes, I laughed and I cried. I thought about surrendering him but chose to work through the challenges. I can honestly say that keeping my dog was the best decision I ever made. He has blessed my life in so many ways and over the years the joy has far outweighed the stress and overwhelming stress I felt in those early days.

All the best,

Ruth Hegarty, M.S.E., Dog Trainer (& dog mom)
Canine Behavior Consultant & Dog Bite Safety Educator
Animal Rescue Konnection (ARK) Volunteer
Adult Dog Adoption Advocate

P.S. Here's me and my rescue boy, Jake →



Helping your rescue dog settle into your home

The #1 thing to remember when you first bring home your adopted dog is to let him decompress and acclimate to the new environment.

Adopting a dog is exciting and you want your new pup to meet all your friends and see lots of fun places which are terrific goals – for later. This is a huge adjustment for both of you. From your dog’s perspective, getting adopted can be stressful and even frightening. He doesn’t really know you, your house is full of smells and sounds he doesn’t recognize and he is likely afraid that this is just another temporary stopover rather than his forever family home. **Peace and quiet is your best friend in the first couple of weeks. You will have your dog a long time so take time at the beginning to allow both of you to adjust.**

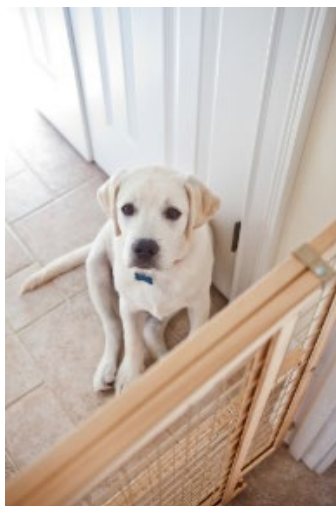
Here are ways to support your dog to settle into his new home:

- **Create a safe place for your dog to rest and relax.** This could be a crate if you are using one (if your dog is not familiar with using a crate, you will need to “crate train” him before expecting him to use it). Learn more about crate training [here](#). If you’re not using a crate, then a dog bed in a corner is good or even in another room that is blocked off from children and other pets by a baby gate. What will make this a safe place for your dog is the knowledge that he won’t be bothered in this space. It’s a place he can go to decompress when feeling overwhelmed and you and other family members will give him time to rest and regroup. Let your dog know this is his spot by tossing a couple of treats there and putting his toys or a blanket with the bed. Make it a desirable place for him to hang out. Your dog will learn that he can retreat to this spot (or his crate) for quiet time. The benefits of this space are twofold. It helps your new dog feel safe and secure in an unfamiliar place while he acclimates to the sounds and smells of his new home and it allows him to see what is going on with the human and other animal members of his new family without active interactions that could be overwhelming in the beginning. At first, your new dog may feel anxious about all the goings-on of his new family. Allow him to be with you without interacting directly with you until he is ready to happily join in. Observe your dog closely so you can see this change in his demeanor take place. It’s exciting and rewarding to see your new dog relax and settle in when you allow him to do so at his own pace.



A cozy crate/corner will make your dog feel safe and secure. Time and patience is your best friend in the beginning.

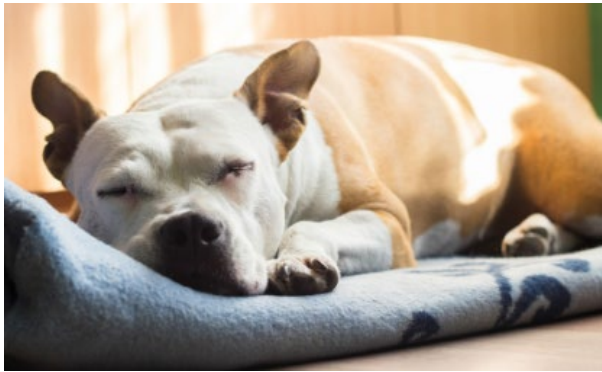
- **Block off areas of your house you don't want your dog to go.** This could be the kitchen or the kids' rooms. The easiest way to do this is with a baby gate. If your dog sits at the gate and whines/cries, toss a blanket over it to obscure the view and distract him with a chew or other toy. There are gates made specifically for larger dogs if a baby gate won't suffice. Closed doors work as well although check on your dog more often if you can't see him. This will also help keep your dog safe from accidentally hurting himself by chewing on electrical cords, eating makeup/socks/etc.



Baby gates are the best way to keep your dog safe and where you want him while still letting him participate in family life.

- **Dogs love routine so get your new dog on a feeding and walking schedule as soon as you can.** Try to feed your dog at the same time in the morning and evening and walk him at the same times as well (although you can vary your routes).
- Speaking of walks, **your dog requires daily exercise to be healthy and well-adjusted.** Most dogs require somewhere between 30-minutes to 2-hours of physical activity per day. The exact amount depends on your dog's age, size, breed and overall health. Start with two thirty-minute daily walks. You will be able to tell if your dog is exhausted by the end of each walk or raring to keep going and you can adjust your walk time and frequency from there. There are actually two types of dog walks. They are human-led walks and dog-led walks. Human-led walks tend to be purposeful goal-oriented walks, such as a short walk before bed so your dog can potty or taking your dog along on your morning jog. Dog-led walks are more meandering strolls where your dog simply follows his nose. Dog-led walks provide important mental enrichment for your dog and are as important as walks purely for exercise. This [article](#) will help you figure out what is best for your dog. Additionally, walking your dog helps the two of you bond and allows him to get used to the sounds and smells of his new neighborhood.
- **ALWAYS supervise your new dog around children, other pets and anyone he doesn't know until you are 100% certain of how your dog reacts in these situations.** As mentioned earlier, it's best to hold off on introducing your dog to friends until after he gets comfortable in his new home. Always introduce him to other dogs on neutral territory. Learn about introductions [here](#) and safety tips for children [here](#).
- **NEVER try to pet your dog when he is eating until you are 100% certain of how he will react. And, really, there will likely never be a good reason to pet your dog during meal times.**

- You may have dreamed of sharing your bed or couch with your dog, hold off on this decision until you know your dog better (and he knows you better). There is plenty of time for couch snuggles down the road, for now, give your dog space. No matter what you decide later about allowing your dog in your bed, **NEVER let dogs sleep with young children.** Dogs have a well-developed startle response when they are sleeping and young children tend to be very active sleepers which is a recipe for disaster.



Your pup will be happy with a soft blanket or dog bed, no need to sleep with you.

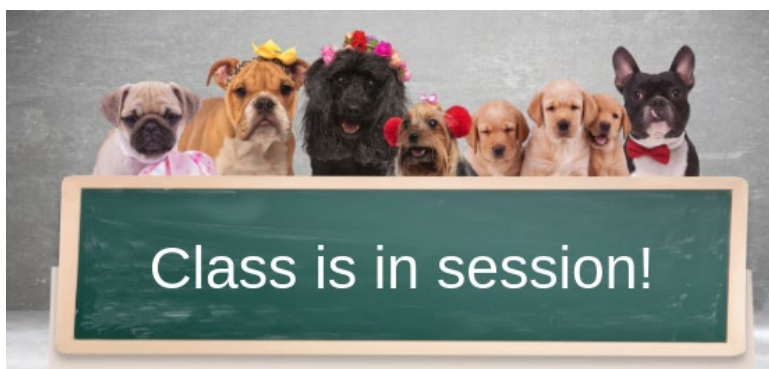
Every dog is an individual and it can take a few weeks to a few months for a dog to fully settle into a new home environment. Whatever works for your dog is what's right. Time and patience are your friends at this early stage.

While you are letting your dog settle in, you can entertain yourself by learning about dog body language which will help you tremendously to understand and work with your dog as his personality emerges and he becomes more integrated into your life. Here are two great places to start: [Positively](#) and [Doggone Safe](#).

Getting to know your dog and building his confidence

After the first few weeks or so you'll begin to see your dog's true personality emerge. This is an exciting time but is also the time when people often feel overwhelmed by their new dog's "sudden" misbehavior. For example, maybe in the first few weeks (sometimes called the "honeymoon" period) your dog was meek and mild but now is barking too much and chewing on the furniture and you think you are going to lose your patience. This is the time after adoption when most dogs get surrendered back to the shelter because their new owners don't know what to do and give up in despair. You don't have to despair because you have this guide and all the resource it links to for help.

The silver lining here is that this is a sign your dog is getting comfortable living with you and that is a good thing. Yes, it's frustrating and you loved those shoes he just ruined but this is the moment we warned you about.



The solution to unwanted dog behavior is training, pure and simple. Remember, for the vast majority of dogs who are surrendered, the reason given is that the dog has “bad” behavior. Those very same dogs have been given zero formal training by their owner pre-surrender. Here’s a secret about dogs, everything they do is based on gaining pleasure or avoiding pain. Dogs never do anything to spite their owners or to try to dominate humans. Your dog wants very much to please you and stay with you forever. **Your responsibility as your dog’s guardian is to teach him how to do that.**

In addition to eliminating behavior problems, training also has the following benefits:

- Teaches your dog how you want him to behave.
- Helps you and your dog get to know each other better.
- Builds your dog’s confidence (as well as yours) and deepens your bond.

ONLY take classes or work with trainers who employ modern science-backed training methods (look for words like positive reinforcement, force free, pain free and click & treat in their description). So-called “traditional” training is based on outdated research and old fashioned beliefs about animal learning. Traditional is used here in a negative sense much like it was traditional to beat children many years ago – some folks still do it but most people realize it’s wrong. Traditional/old school trainers use methods that punish and cause pain such as shock collars and prong collars which can appear to be successful because they suppress behavior but are bad for dogs, do not result in long term success and can damage your relationship with your dog. Positive reinforcement training focuses on teaching dogs what you want (vs. punishing them for doing something “wrong”) and redirecting unwanted behavior. All training advice and resources in this guide are based on positive reinforcement. Learn more [here](#).

Here’s how to get started:

Step 1: Implement a management plan which is a fancy dog trainer way to say keep your important stuff out of your dog’s reach. Put away anything you don’t want your dog to destroy. If the item can’t be moved, block your dog’s access to it with baby gates. You get two main results from management: (1) you feel better because your dog can’t destroy your things, and (2) the dog ceases to be reinforced by those activities which will make training a more desirable behavior that much easier. Management is also effective for keeping your dog safe from chewing things he shouldn’t.



If your dog likes to chew, give him a toy like this fellow is enjoying and keep your shoes safe.

Step 2: Train your dog to do something different. If he barks out the window when the mail carrier arrives, train your dog to go lay in his bed instead. You may want to hire a professional trainer for help changing unwanted behaviors. If your dog is showing signs of reactivity or aggression (which can happen whether your dog is adopted or not), there are professional trainers who specialize in this area. You can locate trainers near you [here](#). Remember that your dog is just doing what dogs do. He isn't trying to disrespect or dominate you. He simply hasn't yet been taught how to behave appropriately. That's your job.

As you get to know your dog, you will learn what types of treats, walks, games, etc. he likes best; how much exercise he needs; what new behaviors you want to teach him, etc.

Helping your dog adapt to your lifestyle

Now, some time has passed and your dog has acclimated to his new environment. You are getting to know his likes and dislikes and he has learned some of the rules of his new household. This is the time to start incorporating your dog more and more into your life.

This is the time where you can introduce your dog to friends (one or two at a time, please), some new places and other dogs. Keep your eye on how your dog responds to each new activity. (Revisit the [dog communication resource](#) if you need a refresher.) If your dog appears uncomfortable around other dogs, give him more time before trying again and take another look at the [introduction resource](#)). If your dog is shy around new people, have a friend or two come over and just sit with you without trying to interact with your dog. Have them toss a treat near him but otherwise ignore him. The best thing to do in these situations is allow the dog to come to the guest. Give your dog the choice to engage or not with new people and dogs. This is all still very new to him. Just like people, some dogs are super friendly and some dogs are more reserved. Your dog may not want to make friends with every creature he meets and that's OK. Allow your dog to guide you in this.

Now is also a great time to engage your dog in confidence building activities. Teach your dog some fun tricks. There are lots of books and videos on easy tricks to teach dogs (see the resource section). Maybe try an [agility](#) or [freestyle](#) class just for fun. Even a simple game of catch will do the trick. Learning and trying new things engages your dog's mind. Dogs are capable of knowing when they succeed at something new which builds confidence. Confident dogs are emotionally stable so it's important to work on this with your dog. Doing these fun activities together deepens your relationship as well so it's a true win/win.



Helping your dog build his confidence will result in an emotionally stable pet for you.

Enjoying your life together

At this point you and your adopted dog have been through a lot together. You've probably had your share of ups and downs, challenges and successes and maybe even some fears and doubts. Along the way you've also shown patience and love for your dog as you've taught him how to succeed.

No doubt about it, adopting a dog is challenging and, as with any important relationship in your life, you will have to work to make it work. Now that some months have gone by and you have set your dog up for success at every turn, you get to bask in a happy life with your dog.

Maybe you aren't quite there yet and that's OK. Rest assured that you will get there. Some dogs just need a bit more time and patience than others. One thing for sure is that it's worth it in the end. All you have to do to ensure long term success and a happy life together is keep doing what you've been doing. Reread this guide when you need a reminder of that and review your notes to see how far you've come.

You are meant to enjoy life with your dog. To do that, train your dog, keep the house rules simple and straightforward, redirect behaviors you don't want to see continue, follow your dog's lead around what people/dogs/situations he is comfortable with and get help from a professional when you need it.

Check in with how you are feeling and reach out for help if you become overwhelmed. Training also takes time and a professional dog trainer can make your life a lot easier by teaching your dog to behave appropriately. Stay committed to providing love and training to your dog and take breaks when you need them.

I guarantee you that your dog wants to please you, giving him the tools and support he needs to do that will make you both so much happier.

Dogs are delightful, live-in-the-moment creatures who can teach humans a lot about enjoying each day to the fullest. Let your dog's antics make you laugh out loud and appreciate each moment together.



Remember, you're a Dog Hero and you can do this. *ENJOY THE JOURNEY!*

Resources

[Animal Rescue Konnection](#) (ARK) for adoption [Success Stories](#) and education information.

[Maddie's Fund](#) also has a wealth of helpful information.

[Positively](#) is the website and blog of Victoria Stilwell with tons of articles, videos and resources for dog guardians. At Victoria Stilwell Academy you can take a free course on [Building Your Dog's Confidence](#).

[DoggoneSafe](#) is a nonprofit organization that teaches children and families all about safely interacting with dogs.

[Creature Good Dog Training](#) is the author's website and blog where you will find more training resources and information about living with a rescue dog.

[The Muzzle Up! Project](#) teaches you how to muzzle train your dog for vet visits or around other dogs if necessary.

[Association of Professional Dog Trainers](#) has a directory of positive reinforcement trainers to help you find one in your area.

[Domesticated Manners](#), run by Chirag Patel, is a terrific resource that includes both articles and videos.

[Family Paws Parent Education](#) provides information for families with dogs and small children whether the dog or child came first.

[Karen Pryor Academy](#) has "click & treat" training information and classes.

[American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior](#) (AVSAB) has resources, a directory of animal behaviorists and helpful Position Statements on dog training and behavior issues.

[Pet Owner's World Magazine](#) is a free online magazine for pet owners published by [Pet Sitters International](#).

[International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants](#) has resource articles, a directory of behavior consultants and a recommended reading list to further your dog knowledge.

(Book) *101 Dog Tricks: Step by Step Activities to Engage, Challenge and Bond with Your Dog* by Kyra Sundance

(Book) *Train Your Dog Positively: Understand Your Dog and Solve Common Behavior Problems Including Separation Anxiety, Excessive Barking, Aggression, Housetraining, Leash Pulling and More!* by Victoria Stilwell.

