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A MONTHLY GUIDE TO NATURAL DOG CARE & TRAINING

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Here's how to make your new dog's adoption work for life.

By Mardi Richmond

Adopting a new dog is exciting, wonderful, and a happy time. But bringing a new dog home is also an uncertain time. What will your dog be like? Will he be a good match for your family? Will he be everything you hoped for?

Bringing a new dog into the home can also, quite frankly, be a rather shocking time for you and your family. Suddenly your life will be compounded by the energy and needs of the new family member. Everyone will go through an adjustment – dogs and people alike. What can you do to ensure that you and your new dog will settle into a long happy life together?

Expectations count

"Have realistic expectations," says Joan DeNeffe. "And be prepared!" DeNeffe has done volunteer work in animal rescue for over 25 years, and is one of the leaders of a monthly coaching group designed to help people with shelter and other rescue dogs start off on the right paw. According to DeNeffe, expecting an adjustment period can be key.

"If a dog is going to be returned following an adoption, it is often in the first three weeks – usually because behavior issues come up that people aren't prepared for and don't know how to deal with," says DeNeffe. But having realistic expectations can help you get through the adjustment period – when behavior issues often peak – with the least stress and the most success.

What will the adjustment period be like? How long will it last? The answer to these questions is simply: It depends – on the dog, on you, and on your environment.

"Every dog is different! Every black Lab and Golden Retriever is different," says DeNeffe. Helping a dog adjust to a new home is a process that can take weeks or months, but the outcome of having a dog who is comfortable and happy is definitely worth the effort.

Truthfully, some dogs come home from the shelter or other rescue situation and settle in with few problems; their adjustment period is brief and unremarkable. Many dogs are even on their best behavior – a honeymoon period – for several days or weeks. They may experience stress, but they deal with it by being cautious and responsive. But other dogs may deal with the uncertainty of being in a new home with other, more obvious stress responses. Some of those may include:

- Pacing and other overactive behavior;
- Attaching to one person in the family, but being very shy of others;
- Mouthing people, jumping up on them, barking, and chewing; and
- Trying to escape or hiding.

Don't panic if your new dog behaves in a less than desirable manner. In spite of the initial stress response, over the course of a few weeks or months, most dogs settle in and become wonderful companions. What happens in the first few days or weeks is not necessarily indicative of what life with the dog will be like longterm. But how you handle the stress response can certainly affect the long-term outcome.



As tempting as it may be to take your newly adopted dog to the dog park in the first few days following his arrival in your home, DON'T! He needs a few weeks of quiet walks with you, to learn what you expect and to develop a bond and trust with you.

Equally important to remember is that while there may be a significant adjustment period, it is usually much shorter than the several years it takes to raise a puppy! And there is a whole lot you can do to make the transition easier. By being aware, modifying and redirecting any unwanted actions from the start, you can help your new dog become a good citizen.

Plan and prepare

Just like when you bring a new puppy home, when you bring home an older or rescue dog, being prepared is key.

Make sure you have basic supplies – like food, bowls, collar and leash, bed, and toys. (See “Pre-Puppy Preparation,” September 2005, for details on supplies and equipment.)

In addition, you will want to decide on and set up a confinement area, a place your dog will stay when you cannot provide supervision. It is important to recognize that the dog will be new to your environment and giving him too much freedom too soon can set him up to make behavior mistakes (such as having an accident in the house or chewing the wrong thing). By giving the dog a safe, confined place to be when he is not being supervised, he will be able to make a gradual and successful transition.

Make the confinement area the place where your dog gets his meals and his favorite toys. Make it a safe place he can call his own. Ideally, the confinement area will be in the same part of the home that you spend time together. A crate works well, but you can also use baby gates or an exercise pen to section off a small safe section of your home.

Get the whole family involved in deciding what the rules and routines will be for your dog and help him learn those rules from the first day home. Will he be allowed on the furniture? Where will he sleep (ideally in the same room with you)? Providing structure helps a dog learn the house rules and helps him feel safe.

“These rules will be a goal,” says DeNeffe, emphasizing that it will take time for the dog to learn what is expected.

Start a houstraining routine right away, too. It is safest to assume your dog is not houstrained. Even if he was houstrained in his last home, time in a shelter or simply being in a new environment can mean that he will not understand when and where he is to go now.

Just as you would with a puppy, set up a routine, confine your dog when you cannot supervise, take him out on a regular schedule, and praise or reward him for going in the right place. Adult dogs will often houstrain faster and easier than puppies because their bladders are mature and they can “hold it” longer.

De-stress!

In general, keep stress to a minimum for the first few days or weeks. How long depends on the dog’s personality. Keep in mind that just the act of moving into a new home is stressful for most dogs – not to mention the stress he may have experienced before coming into your home. It can take several days or longer for the dog’s stress hormones to return to normal levels once he feels safe and calm.

Take your time in introducing your new dog to friends, friend’s dogs, and the local dog park. Remember that you will have this dog for the rest of his life; there is no rush! Give him time and space to settle in and bond with you before he is exposed to the world. Have him play and exercise in your yard and take him for walks in a quiet low stress area for the first few days or weeks.

Timing is everything

If at all possible, allow extra time in your schedule to help your dog adjust. At minimum, bring your dog home before a weekend so you can spend extra time helping him settle in. Ideally take a few extra days or a week or two off from work.

But that doesn’t mean spend every minute with your dog (even though you’ll want to!). In fact, it is best to get your dog used to short absences within a few hours of bringing him home. Soon after you bring your dog home, take him for a short walk or bathroom break. Then introduce him to his confinement area. You can give him a great chew bone or a stuffed Kong and leave him in his crate or exercise pen for a few minutes.

Throughout the first few days, leave your dog alone in his confinement area for several minutes at a time. Vary the time you leave him from 30 seconds to 20 minutes. Start by leaving him in the confinement area for a few minutes while you are home, and gradually build up to leaving him for 10 to 20 minutes or so while you leave the house. By keeping your absences short, matter of fact, and pleasant, your dog will learn that being alone in the new

home is safe.

You can also make your departure a good thing for your dog by giving him a food-filled Kong each time you leave him.

Train for confidence

Basic training – sit, down, stay, come, and walking on a leash – can begin the day you bring your dog home. Use positive training methods such as clicker training. You can get started by referring to a book or video. Beginning training right away can help dogs understand that you will be taking care of them, and that they are safe. It will also help build confidence. For many dogs, training games will help them de-stress and settle in quicker.

Some dogs, however, will be “shut down” at first and may have a hard time learning a new behavior or even doing something they already know. Don’t worry if your dog is not as responsive at first as you might like. If your dog seems reluctant, just make training games very easy, fun, and rewarding.

Try working with one simple behavior, like sit, and practice that until he seems ready to experiment with other behaviors. Or, if that seems too much, you can begin by simply hand feeding a portion of your dog’s meals to help him learn to trust you.

While training right away is beneficial, wait a few weeks before taking your dog into a class if he is stressed at all. For some dogs, you may even want to wait a little longer as training classes can also be very stressful. DeNeffe notes that for her dog Barkley, a month and a half was way too soon after re-homing to start a training class. “He needed to relax into his world first,” says DeNeffe.

If you need help right away, consider having a trainer come to your home instead of starting a class. Waiting to start a class until your dog has settled a little, and you have had time to bond can help you both get the most from the experience.

With most dogs, bonding takes time. While a dog may form an attachment to a person quickly, he or she may not be bonded to the point of trusting that person to provide safety for several weeks.

Make no assumptions about socialization

Most dogs that are adopted through rescue groups, shelters, or private re-homing have had at least some socialization. With some exceptions (for example, puppy mill breeding dogs), many rescue dogs have lived in homes and have had exposure to people, daily activities, and common noises. But each dog’s experiences are different.

One of my dogs, for example, originally came from a ranch. She had wonderful socialization around animals, people, and children. But because she had lived in an outside run in a quiet country setting, city noises (like cars) and even common household sounds (like the phone ringing), were initially very frightening when she came to live with us. Conversely, for a dog used to the city, a country home – sheep, cows, and tractors – might seem foreign and scary.

It is nearly impossible for a dog to be socialized to all experiences. If you start off with the assumption that your dog is not socialized, you can expose him gently and gradually to new things. As you get to know your dog better, you will learn where and with whom he is comfortable, and where you will need to provide more socialization to help him settle into his new life with you.

Watch for issues

According to the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy, the top several reasons dogs are given up to shelters are because of moving, landlord problems, cost, and lack of time, not because of behavior problems.

That being said, all dogs have behavior quirks or issues. With a puppy, you learn about their issues gradually, as they grow and develop. This gives you time to adjust, accept, and/or train to resolve the problems. When you get an adult dog, you may suddenly be facing an unexpected behavior quirk or issue. This can understandably feel more overwhelming than the gradual process of discovering behavior issues in puppy hood.

By being alert to any issues your new dog may have, you will also be able to address them as soon as they arise, before they become a habit. Dogs can be very impressionable in a new environment, especially the first time they try a behavior. Setting your dog up for



Don't be shocked if your new dog does some "naughty" things in his first few weeks or months in your home. Help him out by limiting his opportunities to do the wrong thing. For example, keep your counters free of food!

success, rewarding the behaviors you want and redirecting those you don't want from the first day home, can make a huge difference in the long run.

Learning about a new dog's behavior issues and quirks often triggers a common emotional response, "But he's not like (insert other dog's or past dog's name here)."

It is human nature to compare your new dog to other dogs you have had, to the dog you had as a child, or to your neighbor's dog. In some cases, a new dog will bring up feelings of grief and loss of a dog that has died. It is normal to have these feelings.

If you find yourself comparing your new dog to another dog, try to keep some perspective, especially if the new dog isn't measuring up. With time, you can (and will) develop a deep and meaningful relationship with your new dog, too. In fact, over time, he will probably become the dog that you later say, "But he's not like . . ."

Be patient

Give your newly re-homed dog more time than you think they need to adjust. Wait until their stress hormones return to normal before taking them to places that may produce even more stress. Keep them on leash in open environments until they are trained and you are sure they will stay with you. Use your confinement area longer than you think necessary. Then slowly and carefully give your dog more freedom as he can handle it.

"Try to think from the dog's perspective," says DeNeffe, talking about looking at the re-homing process from the dog's point of view. While we can never really know what goes on inside a dog's head, it can be helpful to imagine what their experiences may have been.

Imagine what your emotional state might be like if you were suddenly plucked from your current life (leaving everything you know and love behind), put into a shelter environment where you were forced to live with noise and uncertainty, then suddenly placed in a new family where you not only don't know anyone, but you don't know the rules or speak the language.

Be patient with your new dog. Give him the best start possible in his new home. And remember, with time and patience, everyone will settle in.

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