

Newbie Help



Adjustment Period

There will be an adjustment period when you first bring your new dog home. Adjustment periods can range from hours or days to weeks or even months. Keep in mind the adjustment period varies from dog to dog and situation to situation.

New situations are stressful to many dogs, and a stressed dog can act different than they normally would. The dog's behavior during the adjustment period generally has nothing to do with how well a dog likes you. It's about the dog learning they can TRUST you. Be prepared for this. It's normal. And it's nothing personal.

In some cases, our rescue dogs have been abandoned, ignored by their previous owners, in a shelter with little interaction or anyone who cares about them. In other cases, we are amazed that no one came to the shelter looking for the dog or that anyone would have relinquished them to the shelter! Our volunteers will share everything we know about the dog's history, but often we have very little to share other than what we have learned since they've been with us.

Most rescue dogs are extremely receptive to attention, but new situations can be stressful, and this is why we suggest you read this to get an idea of what can happen, and some ideas of what might help your new dog adjust.

If you're prepared for a long adjustment period you'll be pleasantly surprised when your dog takes almost no time at all to adjust to your home!

Adjustment Behaviors and Timeframes

These depend on numerous variables including the following (keep in mind this list is not all-inclusive...every dog is a little different):

- ***The Dog's Temperament*** - How it reacts to or interacts with humans and animals. This has both a genetic and environmental aspect. Especially important is how your new dog handles stress.
- ***The Dog's Past Experiences*** - We often do not have any details on a dog's past experiences. Those experiences can range from loving to abusive to abandoned.
- ***The Experience Levels and Attitudes of the Human Family*** - How you handle all aspects of a dog's care, including his reactions to the upheaval in his life, can affect the types and duration of his adjustment related behaviors.
- ***The Pack Dynamics of the Humans and Other Pets in the New Home*** - This includes the animals in your home and how the humans and animals interact with each other.

Adjustment behaviors vary from dog to dog, and are not always negative or even noticeable at the time. In fact, for many dogs, you will not even perceive the change; rather, the dog will gradually get more comfortable in its' new surrounding and their behavior will gradually change as a result.

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So What Kind of Things Can You Expect?

Chances are for the first week or two, the dog will either be on their very best behavior or will revert back to behaviors they had prior to being with the rescue group. After all, dogs are as individual as humans. For most dogs, in a short time they will start to feel more comfortable and will show more of their normal self.

Symptoms of Stress Often Seen During Adjustment Periods

- ***Different Behavior than when at Foster Home*** - Don't expect your new dog to act just like it did in their foster home. Chances are they were there for at least a week or two, and had already adapted to that home and felt comfortable there. Ask the foster family how long it took to get adjusted, and in about that same amount of time, you should expect to see that same dog again.
- ***Attempts to Escape*** - This dog has not formed any bond or loyalty to you yet. Be prepared for the dog to dart out an open door, jump the fence, dig out, or run away if let off-leash, etc. And expect that if they DO escape, they will keep going. Here are some things to watch out for:
 - ***The First Few Trips Outside in the Yard*** - Go outside with your new dog and observe. If the dog doesn't try to dig or jump, then go inside and watch through a window. This way you can find out if they will attempt to escape from the secured yard.
 - ***Use Baby Gates or Barriers to Block Escape Avenues*** - If you don't have a workable barrier or your home design doesn't allow for this, be extra cautious when going through outside doors. The first few days, make sure the kids do not go out the doors without you controlling the dog.
 - ***Don't Allow the Dog Off-Leash in an Unsecured Area*** – Remember, a new dog might run away because they have not bonded with you.
- ***Destructive Behavior*** - A dog that is not normally destructive when left unattended may be so at first in a new home. This is because the dog is locked up in a strange place, and doesn't consider it home yet. It's important to carefully monitor your dog and ensure that these do not become habits. See the section on "*Control and Monitor Actions*" below. Crate training will also come in handy, and is something you can use in the future if you take your dog to hotels or elsewhere! Refer to "*Crating*" for more information on crate training.
- ***More/Less Friendly and Outgoing than Normal*** - Your new dog may act less receptive to human companionship than normal at first. It may spend time in a specific room or in their open crate to avoid or limit contact with humans or other pets. Conversely, some dogs under stress may be more friendly even needy, as they seek to be reassured.
- ***Nervous or Aggressive to Other Animals*** – Your new dog may be nervous or mildly aggressive with other pets as it seeks to find its' spot in the pack. See "*Pet Introductions*" for more information.
- ***Refusal to Eat*** – Your new dog may refuse to eat. You may need to entice the dog with something human or a bit of canned food on top of dry food, but it's not something to be concerned about the first day or two. If it persists into the 3rd day, please call or email your contact(s) at the rescue organization.

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- ***Nervous or Agitated*** - Your new dog may pace, whine, bark or otherwise appear agitated or nervous. Let them check out the new surroundings if that's what they want to do. If you limit the new surroundings at first, your dog may feel less overwhelmed. Others will be insistent on getting on the other side of closed doors.
- ***Refusing to Play*** – Your new dog may not want to play at first. Keep play light-hearted. If the dog acts disinterested, try playing with another pet to get it interested, or even play a silly game of keep-away with yourself in front of the dog.
- ***"Elimination" Issues*** - Your new dog may appear to have lost their housetraining. This is normal. If it happens, see *"Control and Monitor His Actions"*, below.

Most Dog Lovers are NOT Dog Trainers

Keep in mind that your family's interaction with your new dog can cause it to display behaviors that it may not have displayed in its' previous home(s), including the foster home. So if the dog always lived with someone who was very proficient at dog training and behavior and you are not as well-informed on that subject, the dog may begin to show behaviors aimed at trying to play leader of the pack. Likewise, if the first family was the less-informed one and you have trained dogs for years, you may not see any of the negative behaviors a previous family may have reported.

In addition, having dogs for years does not equate to being well-informed on dog behavior and training issues. Many people have owned dogs for years and have been very fortunate in the individual dog(s) they owned. They may have never dealt with a dog that needed a calm, firm hand to handle a confident and maybe even dominant temperament. It's important to understand that these issues are normal and to ask for help when you need it. Most of us are not provided with training or teachings on how to interpret dog behavior and handle dog training issues. We learn as we go along. And if we have an easy dog, we may have less to learn than a family who had Cujo or Marmaduke living with them. Spending some time taking an obedience class or two can really help to improve you and your dog's relationship. Include the entire family if possible!

Helping Your New Dog through the Adjustment Phase

While there is no specific formula for determining how each dog will behave during its' adjustment period or how long that adjustment period will last, the good news is that there are things you can do to help your dog adjust! So, what can you do? Here's the way to start.

- ***Establish a Routine*** - Routines can go a long way toward creating comfort and trust for your dog. Keeping with the same general timeline can help your dog catch on to routines even faster, the routine does not have to be so much time specific (exact same time each day) as much as issue specific. There is no need to feel you cannot provide an adequate routine even if your day-to-day life is relatively "unstable" time-wise. So if you feed twice a day, once in the morning, once a night, always do so. And if one day a week you walk in the morning, twice in the afternoon, and all others in the evening, you are still giving the routine of daily consistent walks. The same with play and training time.

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- **Provide Adequate Exercise** - Walks are very important right from the very beginning. They serve to both relieve stress and strengthen your bond as leader of your dog. Dogs that have a clear leader to follow are not only less stressed, they are also less likely to try and become the leader themselves.
- **Exercise Needs to Involve YOU** - It is not enough to simply let your dog in the yard to play. Yes, they certainly may play quite actively and get physical release that way, but a big part of providing adequate exercise is that it gives you an opportunity every day and in a pleasurable way to enforce your leadership role to your dog.
- **Exercise Needs to Be of Adequate Duration** - When you walk your dog each day make sure you are doing so for a period of time that is adequate for your dog given his level of health and activity. Contrary to what many think, exercise is especially important for dogs with certain joint ailments. Build up the length and intensity of your walks/jogs gradually and with consideration to the health of each dog. Consult your veterinarian for specific details.
- **Exercise Needs to Be Controlled** - Remember that a big reason for these walks is to work on your relationship, not just to get physical exercise. YOU are in control of the walks...where you go, the pace, when you stop, even when your dog relieves itself. See "*Being Pack Leader*" for more info on this subject.
- **Control and Monitor Actions** - It's important to carefully monitor your dog the first few days (sometimes longer) and ensure that he does not develop negative habits such as digging, chewing inappropriately, and various housetraining accidents (soiling the home, dumpster diving, counter surfing, etc.). We highly recommend crating the dog when you are unable to monitor the dog's behavior. Please see "*Crate Training*" for more specific info on why this is a good idea and how to go about it. Whether you crate train or not, allowing your dog to immediately roam free in your house or yard is risky to your other pets, your home and your yard. As you begin to see your dog doing well, you can test "free roam" for short periods while you're home; gradually extend the time and eventually test their behavior while you are gone. Keep in mind that unattended free roam will also depend upon what other pets you have in your home and how well they get along. It can be dangerous to let all your pets roam free in the house without someone there to intervene if need be. See "*Introductions*" for some thoughts on the subject.
- **Don't Be Pushy About Being Pals** - If your dog acts nervous when you give them attention or somewhat unfriendly, ease up and take it easy the first week...let them come to YOU for attention...this goes a long way toward building trust. Don't push the dog into accepting affection immediately. This will make a positive difference in your dog's perception of you, and will reduce their anxiety and stress level (and yours!). This does not mean don't interact with your new dog, just don't try to force it by being overly friendly. Keep attempts at play light-hearted. If the dog acts disinterested, play with another pet to get it interested, or even play a silly game of keep-away by yourself in front of your dog.
- **Be Your Dog's Leader** - enforce consistently that your dog is to be calm and submissive (as in compliant, not afraid of). Dogs are pack animals, and most are followers. Your dog will be happier and well-adjusted if you are a good leader so that he can be the merry follower. For specific info about why this is important and some hints about how to accomplish this, see "*Being Pack Leader*".

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- **Let the Dog Explore** - Let your new dog check out their new surroundings if they want to. If you may prefer to limit the new surroundings by closing off some rooms at first. By doing this your new dog may feel a bit less overwhelmed, but some new dogs will be insistent on getting on the other side of closed doors.

Learning From Others

An adopter's story:

I adopted a Shepherd/pit bull mix almost 3 years ago and a couple of months later brought her a brother home...he is a lab mix. Both dogs were about 6 months old when we got them from the Humane Society. I read about the struggles that some have with their new dogs and I think...what would you have done if you had gotten our lab mix???

He had separation anxiety for the first year we had him. It was a struggle. He chewed furniture...even chewed a hole in the wall!!! We could not crate him because he would literally tip it over as he howled. I used to call the behavior hotline and ask for help all the time. But giving him up was NEVER an option.

We have a fenced yard and put a doggy door in to allow him to go in and out so he didn't feel trapped. He has turned into an amazing dog and has left his issues behind. He crawls in my husband's lap like he weighs 5 lbs instead of 85...big lap dog. If we had given up on him, I can only imagine what would have become of him. Instead, he is loved and safe. Everyone that brings a dog home needs to understand that, like your kids, you never know what you're gonna get. Be prepared to help them work through their struggles. It's worth it in the end.

An adopter's story:

I love older dogs and adopted a hound mix that was at least ten years old. No one knew anything about her other than she had been found as a stray and had spent the last week at the vet because she was malnourished. With a clean bill of health, she was at her first adoption event. Between her story and sad brown eyes I thought I needed to help her.

With the help of a volunteer from the rescue group, she was introduced to my other dogs. She snarled and growled a little, I was told that was to be expected. She wondered around the house before she went and settled into the open crate I had prepared for her. It wasn't the warm and happy introduction I'd hoped for, but was told it could take a few days for her to "warm up". Over the next couple of days she didn't look happy, she hung her head, and her tail never wagged. She only got out of her crate to go outside, and was eating very little. I was worried I'd made a mistake choosing to adopt her, so I called my contact at the rescue group. We talked and she asked if I wanted to keep working with her, I realized I wasn't ready to give up on her. I mean I'd made my decision to adopt her because I wanted her. I needed to step up and invest some time and effort into helping her.

I quit watching her every move, and told myself to "just relax". I began giving her treats while she was in her open crate, and let her watch the other dogs play and snuggle with me. She watched while I leashed up and took the other dogs for walks. Then one day she gave me a beautiful gift; I arrived home from work and there she was, standing with my other dogs and wagging her tail to greet me!!! I wanted to hug her neck and give her kisses, but I restrained myself and gave her a little scratch under her chin. Then she followed me into the kitchen! My heart filled with joy as I watched her go and eat with the other dogs. My new dog was truly home!

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I am grateful that my rescue organization encouraged me not to give up on her, because she is really the best dog I've ever had. She had obviously never been in a warm and loving home. My home was totally alien to her and it took her time to trust me. I'm so happy she's able to spend the rest of her life with me, where she will be safe and loved.