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## Helping Your New Dog.

Adopting a dog from a rescue organisation is one of the most rewarding, life-enriching decisions you will ever make. You're not just saving the life of a dog; you're creating the space for the organisation to take in another. In addition, the knowledge that you have helped ease the current desperate rescue situation in the UK today will help you sleep at night.

The other worthwhile role that helps to ease the crush in rescue centres is becoming a foster carer; taking dogs into your home on a temporary basis to give them the love and care they may need before going onto a permanent home. In many ways this is the most selfless act of all, knowing that you will have to wave your charge off to start their new life with a new family at some point. 'Failed Foster Carer' is the term given in rescue to those who cannot bear to part with their charges and have adopted them... There are quite a few of us.

In the years I've been working in rescue I've fostered many dogs and have organised the rehoming of many more. In lots of cases, if the dog and the home have been carefully matched there are few problems. However over the years I have noticed problems occurring in the early days and weeks which can be avoided.

When your new dog first comes into the home it will be confused and bewildered, probably stressful and anxious, possibly fearful and aggressive.

Some dogs 'shut down' and do not want to engage in any interaction with anybody, some busily explore everywhere, unable to rest until they have sniffed every last inch of everything. Some become like a shadow to their new human companion. Some, in fact most, find a medium somewhere in between.

The most important to remember is that there is nothing you can actively do to speed up the process of the dog settling down in its new environment. Nothing at all. No amount of hugging, petting, kissing, stroking, feeding or sympathetic cooing will make the dog settle quicker. In fact it will almost certainly make things worse.

A new dog needs peace, time and a calm environment in which to take stock of everything that has happened to them.

Some dogs take only an hour or two to 'bounce back' to themselves, some take weeks, some take months.



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There are three main 'markers' in the social recovery of a newly located dog:

48 hours

2 weeks

6 months

### **48 Hours**

When a dog first arrives in a new location the chances are that their true nature and unique set of behaviours are muted or suppressed while they evaluate their new environment – including the human element. They may be reluctant to eat or drink, may not engage in any social behaviours or actually try to repel interactions with cut off behaviours such as turning away the head or body, walking away or hiding, especially a dog that has come out of a long stay in kennels.

It is absolutely crucial not to crowd the dog during this time and allow them the opportunity to get away from everything when they want to. This is NOT a time to invite the family / friends / neighbours around to meet the new arrival or take them all over the neighbourhood to show them off. A fearful dog who is not being allowed to escape away from situations has no other recourse but to aggress to make his feelings known.

Do not worry too much if the dog isn't eating very much or even at all during the first couple of days. Certainly don't try to tempt them to eat by feeding them human food. A dog can survive for many days without food, it is water that they need and if necessary the consumption monitored (of course, if you have a dog that is suffering from malnutrition, you should have been given clear feeding instructions, hopefully with a vet's input, and should stick to these).

The most important thing is not to panic about water or food consumption as this could make the dog more anxious around water or food and worried about eating or drinking in your presence.

Water must be available to the dog wherever they are at all times (the only exception being prior to anaesthesia on veterinary advice). If you are worried they are not drinking, measure out some water in a measuring jug and empty into the bowl. Every few hours, without the dog seeing, tip the water out and back into the jug to see if any is missing. If no water has been consumed after 24 hours contact your vet and contact him after 12 hours in hot weather (tip... If there is slobber in the water, the dog has been drinking!



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With food, a healthy dog will not starve itself. The best option is to make the food available for 20 minutes and then remove whatever is left. Do not feed between mealtimes. It may take a few days for the dog to realise that it must eat when food is available.

If the dog has still not eaten anything after 48 hours then contact your vet.

When your new dog is eating, don't disturb them or approach them. Leave them in peace to enjoy their food and learn that in this new environment, there is no need to be anxious, no worry about losing their meal. With rescue dogs, most of the time their background is unknown and it may be possible that they have had to learn to protect their food at all costs. Teach them that you are no threat by simply leaving them be when they are eating.

If there are existing dogs in the home, the first 48 hours is **not** the time to insist that they are all settled and sleeping together like lifetime buddies. Depending on the mix of dogs it may take months before everything is settled and creating a balanced dog group can be a complex process that needs the assistance of people experienced in the job who will be able to spot potential problems early on. Contact the rescue or find a qualified, experienced canine behaviourist who will help.

What most dog groups need and rarely get unless they have a switched on human overseeing the interactions is space and lots of time. Using gates and doors to keep dogs safe from each other but able to learn a little more about each other is a very good way of gradually integrating the group. There's no point in rushing things; I have found the slower the integration, the better.

It isn't necessary to take the dog on long exciting walks during the first 48 hours. A potter around the garden or a walk around the block a couple of times a day when its quiet will be fine for these first two days.

Remember the ultimate objective in the first 48 hours is for the dog to settle. You've got a golden opportunity to teach your dog so much in these first few days while he's adjusting to everything; don't waste it.

## **2 Weeks**

Somewhere between 48 hours and 2 weeks, the dog will have taken stock of its new environment and some different behaviours may begin to surface. The most common of these is separation anxiety, where a dog bonds to one or more humans and displays distress when they cannot see them.

It is absolutely essential to teach the dog through 'mini separations' from day



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one that it is okay to be alone. Do not allow the dog to follow you everywhere. Use doors to block them from following you. When you return from the bathroom / garden / garage etc, do not greet the dog but merely walk past them so that they learn that your return doesn't mean excitement and it is perfectly normal for you to disappear and reappear a hundred times a day. Gradually extend this to leaving them alone for 5, 10, 15 minutes at a time, never going longer than the dog can cope with. Setting up a video camera to film how the dog behaves when you are out of sight is a very useful tool.

**Whether you're a foster carer or the dog's new owner, the most precious gift you can give the dog is not your undivided attention; it is the peace of mind to be able to relax whenever you aren't around.**

During this time other behaviours might also appear such as resource guarding, pulling on the lead, jumping up, barking etc.

The most serious of these issues is resource guarding, where a dog will aggress to keep humans or other dogs away from whatever it wants to keep such as an item of food, their food bowl, a bed, a toy or even sometimes a human.

This is always a potentially serious situation and it is imperative that you get help with this as soon as possible, either from the rescue organisation where the dog came from or from a qualified canine behaviourist. **Do not** ignore the problem. It will not go away on its own and will actually almost certainly escalate without intervention.

As with all displays of aggression, whether a growl or a bite, it is imperative to preserve the safety of all concerned and isolate the dog until professional advice can be sought. This will usually mean immediately leaving the area that the dog is in rather than making the dog leave the area.

### **Socialising and Training**

While it is important to socialise the dog, it is not appropriate to take them up to every dog or every person and expect them to all get on without incident.

Dogs do best in a partnership of trust with the human handling them. It is far too soon for this dog to trust in you when meeting new people or dogs or in new situations. You simply don't know each other well enough yet so the best option is slowly and carefully. If in doubt give the other person or dog lots of space and keep things calm and happy.

Learn about canine behaviour and learn to recognise signs of anxiety so that



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you can interpret the intent of the dog and other dogs more accurately; for example, a wagging tail is not always a friendly gesture! An hour or two with a professional canine behaviourist is a good investment in these early days.

Depending on the personality of your new dog, you may have to instil some basic rules on acceptable behaviour. They can't be blamed for not knowing that jumping up / lying on the beds / barking at the neighbours etc isn't acceptable (unless of course it is in your home!). This is a whole new ball game for them. They've got to learn the rules all over again – with your consistent, patient, calm and controlled help.

This doesn't mean making the dog's life miserable – it just means that the dog must exchange a desired behaviour in return for whatever it is that they want. For example, if they want that lead put on to go out for a walk, they must stand / sit still and calm for 5 seconds first. If they want their food bowl they must stand / sit still a few feet away calmly for 10 seconds first. If they want that toy they must stand / sit still for 3 seconds first, etc.

If they don't comply, you withdraw with the item / attention they want and ignore them for 30 seconds, then retry the exercise. Some dogs might get bored with this and decide to take themselves off to bed rather than earn the desired item but this does at least teach them that fighting or pressuring you to gain it is pointless which is ultimately better in the long run than a fight over a resource! Try again later and make the exercise slightly easier to set them up for success rather than failure by making it impossibly hard for them. Remember each dog is unique with individual limits.

If other undesirable traits start to appear in the dog, no matter how trivial they seem at first, the most successful way of dealing with them is to nip them in the bud. Don't struggle alone. Get help. As soon as possible.

## **6 Months**

At around six months most rescued dogs seem to realise they are here to stay. Most situations that the dog has to deal with have been experienced, the routine is known, the humans handling the dog have predictable timetables and familiar traits.

This is when some dogs begin to be 'naughty' and do things that they never used to do, i.e. not coming back when called, not listening to commands, starting to get over confident with new dogs or people etc. They might get 'clingy' and show separation anxiety when apart from certain people.

Again, the key is not to panic and to calmly nip the behaviours in the bud by



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going right back to the training and routine of the first two weeks. It may seem disheartening to go back to the beginning again but the dog will learn again far quicker than it did before. It is simply a case of 'reminding' them of the rules again; they already know them – it won't take long to get control back again.

Some dogs however change in another way and become settled and happier than they ever were at first. They can get more affectionate, more predictable and stable in nature, more responsive to commands etc. It's almost as if they wake up on their 6 month anniversary and suddenly realise they are not going anywhere – they are here to stay.

You have taken in a wonderful, intelligent, unique individual that needs your calm guidance and respect more than your affection, your hugs or kisses when they first come to you. Show your love by becoming the human that your dog trusts to cope with every situation with calm, decisive, gentle but strong guidance and you will be on your way to having a wonderful, mutually fulfilling relationship.

*Jaq Bunn is a full-time professional canine behaviourist and Neapolitan Mastiff Welfare's Behaviour Consultant. She has been working with dogs for over 25 years and runs a successful canine behaviour consultancy in Kent with the help of her two Canine Assistants, Bailey & Sticky.*

