

How to Start Off Right with Your Newly Adopted Dog: 10 Ways to Ease the Transition to Your Home



by Sean McDaniel

“HEY, LET’S GET A DOG!”

If you’ve recently had the exciting experience of adopting a new dog from your local animal shelter, you’re likely hoping that your choice is a good fit for your family and for the lucky dog that you brought home. If it’s already been a few weeks, and some frustration with your new furry friend has already started to creep in, then read on (quickly). I may be able to help you dissipate some of your frustration by giving you a game plan to deal with some of the challenges that have begun to crop up.

In this guide, I’ll give you a few steps that will help create structure for your new dog that will give you the best chance for success in the long run. This booklet is intended to address situations in which your newly adopted dog is *over 7 months old*. I don’t deal with any of the puppy raising issues in this booklet (you can check out my blog and podcast at www.thedogsway.com for more information about puppy stuff if you’d like).

The sad statistic is that more than 3 million dogs a year are given up at shelters in the United States. What’s worse is that many shelter organizations estimate that about 2/3 of these dogs are given up because they simply never received basic obedience training. Granted, many dogs that show up at shelters have more serious issues, but the vast majority of shelter dogs have developed bad habits as a result of never having been clearly shown how to live with people. Many of these dogs have been making up the rules as they go along. Sometimes that works out for dogs, but many times (somewhere around 3 million times a year) it doesn’t. Hopefully, with some new knowledge, and some consistent effort, you will have stopped that cycle of being given up at a shelter for at least one lucky dog.

THERE'S ALWAYS A HONEY MOON



I can't tell you how many clients, soon after adopting a dog from their local shelter, have said to me, "He was so great the first couple of weeks, and then all these behaviors started to show up." In most cases, there is a "honeymoon phase" with a

new dog in your home. While it isn't a certainty, it is fairly common that dogs take 2-4 weeks to show you their full personality and behavioral range. Many clients who experience this shift in their new dog's behavior are perplexed by the phenomenon, and they often say that they feel deceived as well, believing that the shelter from which they adopted withheld information about the dog. While occasionally, shelters will try to place a dog in a new home more quickly by being less than thorough in disclosing unflattering information, the vast majority of shelters I've seen and worked with are honest, thorough, caring, and straightforward. Why a foster family's or a shelter's experience with a dog differs from an adoptive family's eventual experience has more to do with how each of them structure a new dog's environment. Rescue shelters and foster homes must be fairly structured. They have rules about how they do things around their place. Dogs actually like this; they thrive on consistency. Dogs like to know what the rules and rituals are. One truism of dog ownership is, "If we don't give them rules, they will come up with their own." Sometimes we get lucky, and the rituals that

dogs come up with on their own comport with our daily lives without too much stress and challenge. Often, though, a dog's self-made rules don't work very well for us. That's when people usually call me and ask how to fix the problem.

Adopting a Dog is Sort of Like Hiring an Employee

Adoption for a dog is very much like being hired for a human. If you've ever had the experience of working for McDonalds, Starbucks, or some other equally structured company, you'll know that there's a "company" way to do things, which they make clear

when they bring in new employees. If, on the other hand, you've worked for a less structured company, you know firsthand the frustration that can result from a lack of clear protocols. If you show up for your first day on the job and find out that there's no written job description or training manual, you might initially be excited by your freedom at this new job. You may think, "I guess I can just do things



however I choose." You soon realize, however, that there are lots of right and wrong ways to do things, but the people who hired you assume you're in "psychic mode" and can figure out exactly how they'd like everything done without them having to show or tell you. The frustration and dissatisfaction you'd feel in that job is very much like what newly adopted dogs feel like in a new home without structure.

Is Your Freedom/Responsibility Quotient Out of Whack?

This notion of planned structure is best described by the idea that I call the “freedom/responsibility quotient.” That means that if we give a dog too much freedom relative to the level of responsibility they are capable of, you’ll end up with a dysfunctional outcome. Those of you who have teenagers will likely recognize the general validity of this notion. So, what’s the solution if the “freedom/responsibility quotient” is out of whack? It’s actually pretty straightforward. Immediately decrease the amount of freedom in the short run, and begin to train more responsibility. In my training, we focus on a three-step process: relationship, basic skills, and then policies or default rules that apply all the time (often without having to give a command).



When you adopt a dog, some structured training should begin as soon as possible. Ideally, the two of you will go for a structured walk before you even get home. That walk should have as its goal the establishment of some very basic relationship rules. Essentially, with this initial walk (and all walks after that) you should subtly be teaching your new dog that they don’t determine where you go, how fast you go, or when you stop. You want to teach your dog that it’s not “their walk,” it’s yours (*for more information on how to do that you can check out Podcast #3 on our podcast page at www.thedogsway.com*). Beyond that structured walk, training in basic obedience is crucial to getting a dog on the right track as soon as possible. If you’re

having behavioral issues with your dog, you may have already called a trainer, but “obedience training”, by itself, probably won’t completely solve your issue. Any training you do will likely have to be combined with some household structure and behavior modification. The quickest way to bring the freedom/responsibility quotient back into balance is to begin limiting freedoms – starting today.

Some Tips to Create (or Re-Create) Structure for Your Dog

Place Structure

- 1) Start by limiting the amount of free space your dog has. Close most, if not all, of the doors in your house and get a baby gate or two. The physical restriction of space and the increased reliance on you to get from place to place is a move in the right direction for your relationship.
- 2) Disallow jumping up into laps (yes, even for, small dogs).
- 3) Do not allow your dog on the furniture, the beds, the kids, or the kitchen counter (if your dog is big enough to reach it).
- 4) Have your dog wear a leash and collar around the house when with you. Let the leash just drag on the floor behind your dog as they hang out with you. This will allow you to grab the leash to guide them out of areas or away from things they’re not allowed near. The ability to immediately show them what you wanted them to do, prevents you from saying things over and over again with no effect on your dog’s behavior. For example, if you say something like, “Hey, get out of there!” repeatedly, and your dog

continually ignores you, then you have taught your dog that you don't really mean what you say. It's better to say something like this only once, and then show them, with leash guidance, what you meant for them to do. Following up on something you've asked your dog to do, or stop doing, by guiding them with a leash, usually doesn't have to be a "correction" or even a major conflict with a new dog. The 'subtext' in my head is often, "Oh, you don't know what '*get out of there*' means. Let me show you," and then I guide the dog out of the area with intermittent light pulls on the leash. If you simply show you're your dog what you meant for them to do, after giving a command only once, your dog's view of their relationship with you will shift dramatically.

5) If you don't already have one, get a crate, and start acclimating your dog to it. Start this conditioning process by feeding all meals in the crate (without closing the gate). Then, progress from there to closing the gate for a few seconds to a few minutes. After that, start leaving your dog for random longer crate stays to increase their capacity to be in the crate. Frequently, we don't think of being in a crate as a training issue to progress through incrementally (in the way most of us think about teaching a sit). If you treat being in a crate as a training issue, to be learned incrementally, you'll find greater success. (By the way, there's more info on crate training at my blog – check out the article [Crate Training 101](#) if you'd like more on that topic)

6) Take your dog out to the bathroom area on leash. That is, don't just send your dog into the back yard to "go". If your dog shows up at the patio door a half hour later you won't know whether they really "went", and probably more importantly, you won't know what else they've been up to.

7) Don't leave your dog in the back yard unattended, for any amount of time, until you're sure your dog knows the rules of that area. There are a whole list of issues that I deal with every week because new dogs got to come up with their own backyard rules.

Time Structure

8) Ensure a consistent schedule throughout each day for waking up, sleeping, feeding, bathroom trips, walks, playtime, etc. This new schedule will allow your dog to feel more comfortable with the consistency of daily rituals.

Resource Structure

9) Always do a few minutes of obedience homework prior to every meal. If you haven't started any training yet, try this at your next meal time. Hold the bowl of prepared food and say, "sit." Then just wait. I've tried this waiting game with shelter dogs, and I find about eighty percent simply sit within a minute or so (sometimes after trying several other behaviors). When they sit, use a 'verbal marker' of the behavior (that's a fancy way of saying, tell them, "good!" the moment they sit. Be sure to say this word with the same tonality and volume every time and it will help your dog figure out which behavior you really like. For the first couple feedings, while introducing this command, say, "good" and immediately put the bowl down after your dog sits. After a few repetitions, begin to wait for several seconds before placing the food bowl on the floor (be sure to immediately 'mark' the behavior when it happens with your "good" marker word though). As you progress through longer sits before feeding, introduce a "release" command. That is, a word that means, "Now, you can stop sitting!" I say, "Break!" So, after a few meals your dance routine will look like this:

- Hold the bowl of prepared food
- Say your dog's name and "sit!"
- Say, "Good!" the moment their 'behind' hits the floor.
- Wait several seconds, and then say, "Break!"
- Immediately place the bowl of food on the floor.

Progressively increase the amount of time they are expected to sit prior to each meal. After several days of this, you can begin asking for other behaviors that you've introduced as well, such as "down" or "heel."

Quickly moving into a short 5 minute bout of homework prior to a meal is a great example of blurring the line between "training" and "everyday life" for your dog. We don't want a dog to see you go through a huge commotion to get a leash and collar and any other training equipment you might be using, to do "official" dog training. Rather, it's better to do a dozen, little 4 minute impromptu training sessions throughout the day. Having your dog wear a leash and collar while they're hanging out inside with you, will add structure to these mini-training sessions and pre-feeding 'workouts' as well.

10) Consistently practice giving your dog toys and taking them away. You may start by *replacing* toys rather than just taking them away for a few minutes. You might think about taking a regular chew toy away for a minute and then replacing it with a Kong with peanut butter in it. *One safety note here:* be alert to any body language around toys, beds, and food bowls with newly adopted dogs. Some of these guys have been fending for themselves for a while and may resist having anything taken away from them. If you see any low-level signs of this resource guarding or object possessiveness, call a trainer immediately to help you work through it. (*HINT:* This is an important behavioral trait to ask about when considering any particular rescue dog prior to adoption.)

Exercise and Structure

Ensure that your dog is exercised every day. This usually means more than a 10 minute walk. Find something vigorous that your dog likes to do: fetch, running with you, running next to your bicycle etc. Make sure, though, that it's not too "freewheeling."

That is, don't allow them to run all over the place off-leash without any ability to bring them back. If you go to some area in which your dog will run far away from you, invest ten bucks at your local hardware store, in 40 feet of nylon line and a metal fastener. Make yourself a long line with the metal clip at one end to attach to your dog, and a triple knot at the other end that will catch under your foot when you step on the end of the line as your dog attempts to run away from you. There are few worse lessons to teach a dog than "I'm slower than you are, and have no way to make you come back". (TIP: If you think that you're going to have to grab that nylon line at the park or on the hike, I'd also recommend investing an extra 4 bucks in cheap rubberized gardening gloves to prevent nylon rope burns on your hands)

Summary

Create the structure for your dog that makes sense in your home. Also, keep in mind that these early rules can loosen over time. You can begin offering more freedom once your dog has demonstrated greater levels of responsibility. The main idea is that you need to do three things to shape your relationship with your newly adopted dog:

- 1) Limit your new dog's daily freedom early on
- 2) Teach your new dog all the rituals of your household (There are more than you think!)
- 3) Begin structured training as soon as possible

Hopefully, these ideas can help bring back the "magic" you felt in your dog's initial couple of weeks with you. If you're reading this prior to adopting your dog, then you're way ahead of the game. Kudos for being so proactive!

Best of luck with your new pooch. Your dog is lucky to have someone who cares enough to learn about how to be a better owner.

Feel Free to Check in With Me

If you have questions or comments please feel free to email me directly at:

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Also, there's a lot more information on my blog and podcasts at

www.thedogsway.com

I look forward to hearing about the progress with your new dog!

All the best,

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