

I GOT A SHELTER/RESCUE DOG

Realistic expectations!

Taken from a talk given by Louise Thompson ABC of SA

INTRODUCTION

Many of us, who are involved with animal rescue, tend to push adoptions as a good choice for owners wanting a new dog! We cajole, we beg, and are very quick to point out the advantages, the moral reasons, and the humanity of saving a life! However, we are often **NOT** so quick to point out the potential downside! Therefore, it's not surprising that new owners often have totally unrealistic expectations of their new rescue dog! This can often result in a dog becoming "re-cycled" and ending up back in the system - something all rescuers and shelters want to avoid at all costs!

An adopted dog **CAN** fulfil many expectations, & some rescue animals quickly fit into a new home, new routine, new dogs, new people etc. However, without some time, energy, and effort on a new owner's part, things can go horribly wrong. It is unrealistic to expect a newly adopted dog to adapt and fit into a family effortlessly or overnight!

Now, we all know that some rescue dogs come with excess baggage – this is a given. **So what now? Where to from here?**

Here, I am going to make the generous assumption that the shelter is a reputable one, and has "matched" the dog with the "right" family – viz. breed characteristics', energy levels, life style, environment etc. & that the mandatory sterilisation, micro chipping, health checks, internal & external parasite control has been achieved, & any other relevant medical issues have been attended to.

I am also going to make the assumption, that any dog on dog introductions to any existing dog/s, will have already been undertaken (on neutral ground), & that any existing dogs will have met the new rescue dog at least more than once to ensure (as much as possible) the compatibility of the group, so that there are no surprises when you get the rescue dog home.

If this is not the case then the prospective owner should insist that this is an absolute necessity before taking home a dog that is expected to fit into an existing group or family of dogs.

This should be done under strict supervision in a totally controlled environment, with responsible experienced handlers who have extensive knowledge of dog behaviour, body language & communications, & ensure that those handlers/trainers, have the skills to intervene if/where necessary, using the least possible intrusive methods, resulting in the least amount of stress.

MR / MRS "FIX IT"!

Most people adopt a shelter dog because they are kind, generous people with a genuine love for dogs. Because they are caring individuals they tend to want to see fast results. In many cases this is not possible. Expectations need to be realistic – regardless of the dog's history. Generally speaking, there are no quick fixes. In most cases it takes, time, patience & understanding to see improvements - & the first things the new dog in a household needs is **TIME, & SPACE!**

DEALING WITH THE HUMAN ADOPTEES!

There is definitely a "personality type" of human who will be drawn to taking on a shelter dog, and many of these kind people, do find it extremely difficult to put rules into place – to instil boundaries and not to totally indulge a traumatised animal from day one! Of course this is not easy. Human maternal and paternal instincts want to shower the dog with affection and most people instinctively want to try and "make up" for the animals early bad experiences.

Dogs need boundaries! Logical, realistic boundaries make them feel safe! Gentle rules provide them with structure. If the human takes on the guardian/parenting role – it takes a “whole load” of responsibility off the dog’s shoulders! Less responsibility equals less stress!

When presented with a behaviour modification programme, with dozens of steps to undertake, many owners see this as daunting, and find it extremely difficult to grasp the emotional differences between dogs and people. Being a good role model/substitute parent is very difficult for these kinds of personalities. Many misguidedly think that if they give the dog its own way, in everything, it will become a happy, contented dog.

- A good tip to help adoptees to comply with an integration programme is to provide them with short-term goals, emphasising that they only have to achieve one goal at a time.
- A “settling in” programme could be divided into individual goals and on completion of each goal the next one supplied.
- Often supplying adoptees with **too much** information too soon can cause them to feel overwhelmed.
- With problem dogs this is often intensified as to the new owner, the problems sometimes appear to be insurmountable.
- By dividing a programme up into manageable steps it simplifies the process and makes each and every step more attainable!

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU GET HIM/HER HOME?

The first thing that you do when you get your rescue dog home is **ABSOLUTELY NOTHING AT ALL!**

- Don’t force any kind of interaction / social or otherwise!!!!
- Don’t fuss
- Don’t attempt to play “fetch” or solicit play behaviour!
- Don’t introduce her to your family and friends (it would most likely be too overwhelming and result in a ‘shutdown’ dog.)
- Don’t crowd her with your kids
- Don’t introduce her to your family cat, chickens, parrot etc.
- Don’t stress for the first day or so about food – and meals – even if the dog is malnourished. Stress often inhibits appetite!
- However after a day or so –, if in any doubt or if the dog displays lethargy or the lack of appetite continues **DO** consult with your veterinarian to rule out any possible physiological cause.

GIVE THE DOG A CHANCE TO BECOME AWARE OF HER SURROUNDINGS TO RELAX AND SETTLE IN!

DO:

- **Make sure before you release him/her into your garden, that he is wearing a collar, in case of emergencies. Fit the collar at the shelter/foster home (before you leave for home) if he is not already wearing one. Also ensure that he is either micro-chipped or has a collar tag with all your current contact details on in case of an emergency!**
- Be as calm & as matter of fact around the dog as you possibly can & try to ensure that the environment is as stress free as possible! You should be in control of the environment & management thereof! So keep the environment where the dog is confined as stress free as possible.
- Provide the dog with easy access to clean water
- Provide the dog with a “safe” place where he/she does not feel forced to interact with anyone or anything unless he wants to. (Can be a crate or corner of a room or if outside a kennel etc).
- Make sure the dog has a place where his space is not invaded; where he can withdraw to if he does not want to interact. Initially, **his rights in this regard should be respected.**

Many dogs that have been kept in kennel environments are very happy to be “crated” and this provides them with an artificial “den” or “safe place.”

- **LET THE DOG DECIDE** where he/she feels safe.
- After a couple of hours you can offer a small meal – **DON'T MAKE ANY DRAMATIC CHANGES TO DIET AS THIS COULD CAUSE SERIOUS DIGESTIVE ISSUES**
- Any change should be extremely gradual. Don't panic if the dog doesn't seem interested in a meal – no matter how high value it is! Stress often suppresses appetite!
- Offer small amounts of more frequent meals - you can also make the food a bit more high value. Some insecure dogs battle to eat when humans are present. However – there is always the other end of the scale. The half starved dog who just can't get enough in his gut! This can also be a sign of anxiety. Therefore, even with the over greedy dog - smaller regular-spaced meals would be advised. This is also to ensure a healthy gut & avoid digestive problems developing.
- If the dog gulps down his meal in two seconds you could consider a special dish or a rubber fitting to fit inside the dish. It is comprised of long fingers, which the food settles around. The process of eating is thus dramatically slowed down, as the dog has to eat slower to find each morsel around the fitting.

ARRIVING HOME - CONCLUSION:

However, as much as I have said not to fuss too much and to try and be a little aloof with the dog. If the dog appears to gain comfort from your presence, then **of course** give it some company and affection. Just don't fuss, crowd, or go “over the top.” **If the dog approaches you – certainly give a kind word & a smile & physical contact if the dog is actively seeking this out.** Some more naturally social types really need this – it gives them great comfort - & it is pretty easy to see a dog that is inviting contact. Some nervous individuals with a high food drive can also benefit from you gently dropping a high value treat each time you walk pass them. However, more often than not most dogs need some time to make the initial adjustment without too much interference from their new human family.

Please Note: Most species of animals take approximately 21 days to habituate to a new environment, and that is often only the beginning!

DOGS ARE HIGHLY ADAPTABLE ANIMALS – AND ARE GREAT OPPORTUNISTS!

Their incredible ability to adapt is probably one of the most important facts to take into account when discussing the adoption issue. Virtually **ALL** dogs from all kinds of backgrounds, will be able to adapt & habituate to a new environment – if the environment is an appropriate one, and the dog is given **time**, and his needs are satisfied (that is physical, emotional & intellectual needs)! Therefore the way the dog is initially handled is vital to a successful rehabilitation!

Most dogs when they arrive at a new location are extremely stressed.

Even if they were friendly, bouncy, playful dogs at the shelter / foster home, perhaps happily interacting with people / playing ball / running around etc, the transition to a new environment can be a very frightening time for a dog and he may behave in a very different manner than when you first met him! Try not to take it personally! It has nothing to do with you at all – **Stress can almost paralyse some individuals – so back off and give him/her some time!**

It must be pointed out that many dogs spend a fair bit of time at a shelter before being adopted. Therefore, the shelter becomes their “home” – their territory, & the place they would perceive to be a “safe” location. This is even more relevant if the shelter environment has been a “kennel” type “pound” facility as physical boundaries are very limited. Kennels are often only a couple of square meters. This would in itself present huge challenges for a dog that had been confined long term in such a small space.

Not all dogs adopted are fortunate enough to have been in a family foster home environment, or for that matter from a good, well run shelter where dogs are socialised, walked and have human contact whilst in shelter care. There are many shelters that are terrible places of disease and squalor.

Many dogs, who come out of the old fashioned concrete kennel “pound” type environments (that are lucky enough to find a home), could already be suffering from various behavioural conditions synonymous with confinement - such as kennel dog syndrome, (severe stress behaviours caused by confinement and lack of mental and physical stimulation). These dogs can be **overwhelmed** by a large garden and some could even suffer from agoraphobia (a condition characterised by an irrational fear of public or open spaces)! Crowds of people too can be **overwhelming and terrifying!** A large noisy family can also be overwhelming to a dog that has spent time in a concrete wire kennel enclosure!

It is a known fact that dogs that come out of a pound type environment have far less chance of integration into a new adopted home, than dogs in good family foster homes! Many dogs that come from these kinds of shelters stand little chance of being re-homed – many as a direct result of “kennel dog syndrome”. Dogs confined for long periods of time in “pound” type facilities often become withdrawn, lose condition and interest in their surroundings & can also sometimes display **stereotypical** behaviours (repeated patterns of behaviours for no specific purpose or reason). In severe cases they can even self mutilate – (acral lick granulomas) – itself a form of stereotypical behaviour whereupon the dog chews itself excessively until lesions are formed & often-permanent tissue damage can often occur. The self-licking and chewing, acts as a release of tension for dogs, which are bored, socially isolated, confined for long periods of time. Pacing can also be evident, as can spinning or tail chasing – all three of these problems can sometimes be linked to confinement stress related behaviours - where animals are kept in an area with little or no mental stimulation – common in a “pound” type environment. All these behaviours can also become habituated – even after re-homing! In severe cases veterinary input might be necessary and drug therapy is often indicated.

Loose stools can also be a problem in these kinds of environments and whilst it can often be connected to internal parasites can also be a symptom of stress and severe anxiety.

Dogs arriving at a new location or environment, can be extremely vulnerable, & need space and time to start the adjustment period.

ABUSED DOG? / NOT NECESSARILY!

Many people automatically assume that every nervous, shy, timid and neurotic rescue dog has been physically abused and/or beaten. There are of course many forms of abuse, (both physical and psychological). If your rescue dog is avoiding people, or exhibiting fear aggression it does not necessarily mean that he has been beaten. In my experience many of these dogs **have not necessarily** been physically abused, and could instead have been isolated for long periods of time.

Of course some certainly bear the scars of physical abuse, that is a given..... However, there are many individuals who have simply been kept in total isolation – resulting in poor social skills, severe anxiety/stress & often fear related behaviours.

Dogs who have experienced a total absence of socialisation – both inter and intra species, (“people / dog” and/or “dog/dog”) for example - dogs that have been kept as “yard dogs” who have been kept isolated behind four walls, with nothing to occupy themselves with, and little or no mental/physical stimulation, will often present with stress/anxiety, lack of confidence and poor people skills, **are often mistaken as signs of physical abuse.** As an animal behaviour consultant, **unless I know such abuse to be a fact it would be unethical of me to simply ‘assume’ abuse!**

THE FIRST NIGHT:

Many people feel that they have to give these shelter dogs extra love and double attention – in order to make up for what the dog has lost out on - just give, and give, and give, and then give even more..... with little, or no thought to the behavioural patterns they are setting. Dogs habituate to behaviour pretty quickly, & from the beginning, the rules you set could quite likely be the ones that you are stuck with, & in some cases you could live to regret! If a dog is successful in its aim – it will certainly repeat the behaviour that caused the success (+R) Each and every time! So think very carefully about some of the more basic things you are doing and the patterns you are setting, like for example where is the dog going to sleep?

It would be very unfair to start him off in the main bedroom (no matter how sorry you feel for him) if your end aim is to have him sleep in the kitchen. So decide from the beginning where the dog is going to sleep. Prepare an area where you have decided the dog can sleep. Make sure he is provided with his “safe” place / crate / bed / quiet undisturbed corner etc.

Try to get him outside last thing before you go to bed if possible to encourage him to toilet – if he doesn't comply – don't worry. It is possible that he is going to have a few “accidents” for which you should be prepared.

I personally never recommend that you put newspaper down for him to toilet on at night (or any other time) as this would be sending him the message that toileting indoors is ok! If you are able to – and I often suggest that you set your alarm clock and get up a couple of times a night for the first few days, & go outside with him to see if he is willing to toilet. If we limit his choices – there is less chance of an “accident” however – there are no guarantees! Each dog is an individual, and this should never be forgotten!

Anxious dogs often present with loose stools! Getting up a couple of times through the night to give him an opportunity to toilet outside for a few days is well worth the effort in the long term!

Whilst I would not feed him or offer food late the first night (feed mid afternoon for the second meal of the day for several days before you change meal times). To help make him feel safe it might be a good idea, when you retire for the night, to leave him with something of high value to chew. Preferably something non-synthetic a suitable bone, or hide chew or some cow hooves with some yummy filling - peanut butter or beef stock smeared inside. This will help him to vent any frustration on (chewing is good for “venting”) and keep him occupied whilst all on his own. This could also save your kitchen cupboards – dogs often chew to relieve stress! Providing him with something to chew when you are unable to supervise him often reduces or eliminates house damage!

Dogs who have come from “kennel / pound” environments are rarely taken out to toilet so often have little choice but to toilet on the concrete floor. How is a dog from such a background supposed to differentiate between tiles and concrete? A good many of these dogs will need to be taught toilet habits from scratch.

SLEEPING ARRANGEMENTS:

If you have other dogs & they are socially compatible, you could simply put him in the same area where the other dog/s sleep – their company would make him feel safe & he is then less likely to panic. The existing dogs could most likely also “role model” many behaviours to him so this would also help him to feel secure and begin the journey of habituating to his new home.

Just ensure that he has his own space/bed etc in case he needs an “out.” An indoor dog crate or kennel is ideal for this purpose and is mobile and can be moved wherever you are. Double bonus, the dog is provided with a safe haven but is not excluded!

Each individual person has a different point of view as to where a dog should sleep at night. There are no right or wrong rules (**as long as you are not dealing with an aggression problem** or a dog who has personal space issues or one who likes to defend his sleeping area).

You are the one who decides where the dog sleeps. It is your dog and that is your right! Everyone has a different point of view. As long as you know any rules that you set now are most likely going to be lasting ones! If you decide you don't want him on your bed but would like him in your room, then you could confine him to a designated sleeping area or crate train him so he can sleep next to your bed so he doesn't feel alone, (thus safe and not abandoned!) If the dog has not been crate trained or is not accustomed to sleeping in a crate, this might have to be accomplished first.

I would like to add that there is no scientific evidence that permitting your dog on the furniture or bed etc. has anything to do with dominance or rank in dogs. Most behaviours often described as being related to dominance are simply a lack of training on behalf of owners, so if you are happy to have your dog sleeping on your bed, you don't have to worry about him taking over your home!

THE NEXT FEW DAYS:

If he decides to approach you – great! You should show pleasure and verbally praise with positive non-invasive body language. **Don't lean over** the dog or be invasive in your demeanour – as dogs perceive this as threatening. A good idea is to only approach him (sideways on) leading with your shoulder, as this is perceived as non-threatening, or you could make yourself smaller (you can crouch down in an inviting manner on one knee) if you are able to do this without leaning forward.

If he is an only dog, you can pop him a soft, high value treat each time he approaches you on his own bat – However, be careful if one of your existing dogs has resource guarding issues or is defensive over high value treats or objects. If you are giving him a treat when he is approaching you make sure that your movements are very slow and fluid. If for example, he is hand shy or worried about sudden movement, you can roll a treat to him, make sure your hand and arm movements are non-threatening and he can see your intent by your deliberate slow movements.

If he keeps his distance don't force the issue, and don't ever in the early stages force him to interact with you if he is unwilling. In addition if he shows fear of anything **NEVER force him to confront his fears**. Once he is settled in you can start to put together a programme to work on fear using counter conditioning and positive reinforcement and other +R desensitisation methods.

Let **him** be rewarded for approaching you – let **him** find the interactions valuable and rewarding. This will eventually equate to **him wanting to please you because there is a pay off!** This is a good foundation for future canine/human interactions. The only exception would be if a dog was ill or needed veterinary attention – then the rule of course does not apply.

INTRODUCING THE FAMILY:

For the first 24 hours I would keep the kids & everyone else in the family really low key.

Over the next couple of days – depending on the dog's individual tolerance levels, you can start introducing the family **one at a time**. Don't introduce them all at once – especially if you have a large rowdy family.

One at a time is enough for him to cope with at this stage. Keep visitors at a minimum, and let the dog decide if he wants to interact or not. Initially instruct your visitors to be as non-influential as possible! If he shows interest – get the visitor to drop a soft, high value treat on the floor and if the dog approaches looking for more, they can repeat and build up to letting him take the treat from their hand.

Make sure that if treats are being given that you flatten your hand (like feeding a horse) as many rescue dogs have no tit bit manners & may snatch, which could give the visitors / kids a fright and also panic the dog... so **set him up for success – not failure!**

This should be your attitude in all interactions and with all his experiences!

Don't force him to interact if he is not ready! It is early days yet and you have lots of time!

THE “HABITUATION” / ADJUSTMENT PERIOD:

Expect an adjustment period. You might be pleasantly surprised – some rescue dogs come into a new home & within a few hours it is as if they have always been there. However, the vast majority need time to get to know you & your family, & learn each other’s personalities & quirks. Remember he doesn’t know your routines. He doesn’t know your rules. He doesn’t know your friends. He doesn’t know lots of stuff. So give him time to adjust!

After going through such a trauma as being re-homed at least twice in a reasonable period of time – he is going to make mistakes! Both of you are going to have to work hard together for you both to feel at home and content. As mentioned previously the average dog needs approximately three weeks to habituate to the new environment!

AFTER THREE WEEKS MY RESCUE DOG IS SUDDENLY BEING VERY “NAUGHTY”

I often get calls from clients who have adopted a rescue dog and they tell me that for the first couple of weeks he has been an “absolute angel!” then suddenly he has “changed” & become the dog from hell! Hmmmmmm the dog has now habituated to his new environment is now starting to **feel safe** and have trust in you – and sometimes this is when it becomes evident why he was surrendered in the first place. Fortunately for the dog – by that time, the new owners have fallen in love with him – so are usually more than willing to work through any issues that start appearing at this stage. So be aware that this could be on the cards, and have some plans of action to deal with some of the more common problems.

He Won't Know The Rules

This is a big one. Every home has different rules. This dog might have gone from comfy living (or not, depending on his origin), to a place with very few comforts (the shelter), to your home, which probably seems like paradise after the shelter. **He's not going to know what to do, or what not to do.** You will need to start to gently guide him into your routines & gently introduce any house rules.

Dogs are also great opportunists. Even if he's never sat on a sofa before coming to live with you, he'll probably try anyway, just to see if you'll let him. The same goes for begging for food, or sleeping on the bed. Don't punish or scold him for trying, but try to **limit his choices** and not put him in the position where he is able to make the “wrong” choice. This can even be in the form of putting up physical barriers to make sure he makes the ‘right’ choices if you can't supervise him.

Good Rules To Establish:

- Give him his own area to eat in. Don't expect him to eat close to other dogs – nor should you let children pester him whilst he is eating - **he might have had to fight to get a meal at some stage!** An indoor dog crate is a wonderful thing to use as a “safe” place. However, he might need to be gradually accustomed to the crate & this could take a bit of time – especially if he has not had previous positive crate experiences.
- He should not be disturbed when in his “safe” place – his “safe place” “rights” in this regard should be respected – especially by the children. He deserves a place where he can escape to if he feels the need. This includes his own space to sleep in – again respect his rights - and he should not be pestered by the kids when he is in his bed
- To help bonding with the dog – the entire family should take turns providing meals & the good things in life.
- The same goes with calm play – (unless he is fearful) try to get the whole family involved as play is a wonderful way to bond!
- The family can also take turns with the scoop the poop duties – this is also a good idea to help teach everyone what a responsibility it is to own a dog.
- Encourage the whole family to take part in some basic training such as teaching the dog to “come” when called. All learning should be reward based & using basic positive reinforcement methods & each and every interaction should be rewarding in some way for the dog.

Be careful which rules you establish / reinforce!

Beware of giving a dog attention whilst exhibiting behaviours you dislike –the attention could be perceived as a reward and the behaviour will escalate! Rather concentrate on rewarding and **giving the dog attention when he is displaying behaviour that you approve of**. Remember not to concentrate on what you **DON'T** want the dog to do – instead, try and think out of the box for something that the dog can do **INSTEAD!** This would provide you with more opportunities to praise/reward.

IN CONCLUSION

Taking on a shelter dog is one of the most rewarding things in the world. It is so gratifying to see an individual animal come out of its shell and flourish emotionally and often physically. In my opinion, often a shelter dog can be more willing to please – more willing to want to work and more willing to give you their “ALL” (especially the working breeds) than many other dogs acquired through reputable breeders and or other “normal” avenues.

I freely admit I am prejudiced, and having had a house full of rescues and shelter dogs for decades, can honestly say it is the only way I would ever acquire a dog! Sure they come with excess baggage – but in my opinion, each and every hang-up and issue is well worth working through!

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