

Adopted a Dog? Avoid These Most Common Mistakes

(this does not apply to puppies / very young dogs)

Having rescued and found homes for 100s of dogs, we see people make the same mistakes over and over again, sometimes leading to very serious problems - ***problems that could be avoided***, with small adjustments to how we interact with the dogs to begin with.

Below are some of the most common mistakes that people make after adopting or fostering a dog, and our tips for what to do instead.

WE DON'T MEAN TO LECTURE, BUT WE'RE NOT GOING TO SUGARCOAT IT.

This document cuts straight to the chase and is meant to be as clear & informative as possible.

If you have any questions, please check our website or contact us.



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1. Too Much Too Soon

➤ IN SHORT:

- ***The dog needs to adjust to their new situation. Don't expect everything to be perfect in the first week and month.***
- ***"Ignore and correct", that's the golden rule. Don't give them loads of attention, and gentle but firmly enforce the rules.***
- ***Practice leaving the dog alone.***

➤ IN FULL:

The dog needs time to decompress from the stress of the shelter, and to get used to their new situation, which includes you. Don't expect much or do much with the dog in the first week.

Leave them be - they can't settle if you are constantly involved, playing, petting, talking. Establish the rules and routine you want (whether they're allowed on the furniture/in the kitchen or not, when and where to sleep, when to eat, etc.), but don't "do" much with them yet. Let them observe and process.

- Leave the dog home alone ON DAY ONE! If you spend 24/7 with them to begin with and then leave for work, they may panic / develop separation anxiety. Crate them to make sure they're safe, leave for 1-2hrs.
- Don't force them into overwhelming situations - don't take them to the dog-park yet, or to work, or to crowded cafes, or jogging... Don't let all your friends pet and cuddle and play with the dog just yet - it may not seem like it, but this is overwhelming for most dogs. All that can wait until the dog has had time to settle and adjust and learn to trust you (not to mention you getting to know your new dog!). Build those things up in increments.

If the dog is shy of people, this is especially important. Don't try to pet them or reach for them, don't talk to them or try to entice them with treats. Play it cool. Let them observe and come to you on their own.

- **Watch their body language:** if the dog is wagging and wiggling and happily approaching people, by all means pet him, but if the tail is tucked between their legs and the dog is tense or frozen still, do NOT pet them - they are scared and not ready. Petting them won't comfort them, it will prevent them from processing their new situation and that is often how bites end up happening "out of the blue" because the dog was overwhelmed and the person did not see it.

(For more info, see our [Shy Dog Handout](#)).

2. Feeling Sorry For Them

➤ IN SHORT:

- ***Don't adopt a dog because you feel sorry for them. It needs to be a good match for other reasons.***
- ***Don't let them get away with unwanted behavior because they seem fearful or had a bad past. Unwanted behavior, especially aggression or food/toy/territorial-guarding need to be corrected immediately.***

➤ IN FULL:

It is never good to take a dog home because you feel sorry for them, rather than because this dog seems like a good match for you. But we understand it happens. Perhaps you saved a dog in a particularly sorry situation, after a long time in the shelter, or with a behavioral issue such as fear. That said:

- Once you get the dog home, ***you cannot treat them as a victim or let them get away with things because you feel bad for them.*** The rules have to be enforced like they would be for ANY dog.
- It doesn't matter if the dog is shy or was abused; if they show unwanted behaviors (especially aggression or possessiveness, growling, barking at visitors, lunging at other dogs, guarding their toys etc.), you have to correct them.
 - Think about a dog pack: other dogs don't care if one particular dog has a past. If he steps out of line, he will be corrected. We need to do the same, otherwise it can get dangerous.

3. Making Exceptions For The First Week

➤ IN SHORT:

- ***This is the most important time to establish what the rules are. Enforce house rules from day 1.***
- ***Practice leaving them alone from day 1; if you stay home all weekend and then leave for work Monday, the dog may freak out.***
- ***Don't let them get away with unwanted behavior because they seem fearful or had a bad past. Unwanted behavior, especially aggression or food/toy/territorial-guarding need to be corrected from day 1.***

➤ IN FULL:

The first week is the time the dog figures out how this new life will work and what the rules and routines are. While you obviously need to adjust to having a canine companion and make accommodations for their needs, don't make exceptions that you can't keep up long-term.

- (this does *not* apply to things that must be worked on incrementally, such as potty-training, or learning to handle overwhelming situations, such as a busy office or dog-park.)
- Example 1: sometimes the dog will need to be left alone at home, so make sure you practice this FROM DAY ONE! If you stay home 24/7 for the first couple of days and then suddenly leave the dog alone, he may freak out and develop separation anxiety.
- Example 2: make sure you have some guests come over in the first few days of having the dog, so that he learns that people coming and going from the house is normal. (Unless the dog is super friendly, people should ignore the dog, otherwise he may get overwhelmed and fearful of strangers coming to the house, which is the opposite of what you want.) The dog should just observe the comings and goings and learn that this is a non-threatening normal event, otherwise he may think he has to defend the house from these new intruders.
- Example 3: if you don't want the dog to get on the furniture, or sleep in your bed, or be in the kitchen when you cook, set those rules from day one and enforce them! If you allow it to begin with and then later start rolling out rules, the dog will be very confused and won't understand what you suddenly want from him.

4. Love Will Solve The Problem

➤ IN SHORT:

- ***It won't.***
- ***If a dog has a behavioral problem (anxiety, aggression etc.) being only nice to them will enforce the behavior and the dog will never learn that those behaviors are unnecessary and unwanted.***
- ***What most people think of as “love” (letting the dog sleep in their bed, giving them lots of toys and treats, snuggling, cuddling, playing with the dog, and talking in a baby voice) are submissive behaviors [see point 5] and that can create many problems.***

5. Toys, Treats, and Letting Them Sleep In Your Bed

► IN SHORT:

- ***Don't play with your dog, especially at the beginning. It can get them over-excited, and it is confusing for the dog.***
- ***Don't hand out loads of treats, or baby the dog, or let them sleep in your bed - it comes across as submissive. The dog needs to get used to you by using his head, not just his stomach.***
- ***Correct unwanted behavior (verbal "No!"). Showing the dog that you are a leader/in control will give them confidence, make them feel safer, and allow them to relax.***

► IN FULL:

Playing with your dog, rolling around on the floor, giving kisses and scratches, snuggling up to them and dispensing treats and toys freely - **these are submissive behaviors!**

- In a pack, it's the subordinates who suck up to the alpha, who give up their toys and treats, who lick him and kiss him because they're trying to please/appease him.

Doing this when you first get your dog home will mean your dog will see you as submissive, which by process of elimination means they must take charge; this can manifest as them guarding the house, defending you (i.e. attacking other people/dogs on walks), and generally trying to control all situations in the way they deem best - often with disastrous results (guests being attacked, leash-reactivity, general anxiousness and fear-aggression).

Being in charge is stressful, so don't make your new dog think he has to take on that responsibility.

- → **Show him from the get-go that YOU are in control of this new life situation**, that YOU are capable of taking the lead. If you show your own dog that you mean business and have the capacity to enforce rules, he'll believe that you can discipline and control others too, and that will make him feel much safer and relaxed around other people and dogs.
- Imagine being dropped in a bad neighborhood of a city whose people you don't know and whose language you don't speak. Would you rather your companion was sweet and loving, but a complete pushover in the face of perceived danger, or a companion who says: "I got this, follow me!" and confidently tells you how to behave in each situation, what do do and not to do, and where to go? **Having a leader whom you trust to be capable is immensely reassuring, ESPECIALLY to dogs who are confused and anxious having just come out of a shelter situation.**
- Show your dog love in other ways: teach them tricks (make them work for those treats!); go for walks as a joint activity [see point 6]; just be with them, at home or in the yard, but be their companion and leader, not their playmate.

6. “*The Walk Is For The Dog To Have Fun*”

➤ IN SHORT:

- **Letting your dog be in charge/pull ahead on the walk leads to leash reactivity.**
- **You need to be in charge on the walk; the dog should be following you, not pulling ahead. Being in charge will contain an excitable/aggressive dog, and will help an anxious dog relax.**
- **Getting the walk right will translate to other areas of life with your dog.**
Contact us for a training session if you need help with this.
- **DON'T amp up your dog before the walk. Calmness is your friend.**

➤ IN FULL:

Thinking the walk is “for the dog” is a very common mistake! People work long hours and then when they finally get home to walk the dog, they think that this is the dog’s time to enjoy himself and sniff and be excited and do whatever he wants / let off steam. Often the dogs are pulling, not listening, and if the dog is a little anxious or insecure, or indeed excitable, letting them lead the walk can quickly escalate to leash-reactivity.

- It's the same as in Point 5: If the dog is confident, he will think he can do whatever he pleases. If your dog is anxious, and you don't take charge, he will think that he has to look out for himself and defend himself (and you!) against perceived threats.
 - Again: imagine walking in a bad neighborhood of a city whose people you don't know and whose language you don't speak. Wouldn't you rather have a companion who says: “I got this, follow me!” and confidently and sure-footedly tells you where to go? Having a leader whom you trust to be capable is immensely reassuring.
- ❖ The dog-park, THAT's where they can run/let off steam (assuming they're not SO unstable that the other dogs get annoyed). On leash, the dog needs to be respectful of you and other people/dogs.

Think of the walk as something that you and your dog do together. So put your phone away and walk with your dog, enjoy the joint adventure outdoors.

- Start the walk as calmly as possible, do NOT amp your dog up with “time for a walk?! Time for a walk?! Wanna go walkies?! Walkies walkies?!“
- You choose the direction and walking speed, and you lead the way. You should be walking ahead of your dog, the dog needs to follow. Change direction frequently so they learn to follow your lead.

- Don't stop if they stop to sniff, keep walking until YOU decide to stop and let the dog have a sniff around (obviously you need to give them potty breaks). When you are ready, walk on and tug the leash to make the dog come along with you. If he is pulling one way, deliberately walk the other way, and so on.

All of this demonstrates to the dog that you are a confident leader and you make the decisions, which will allow them to relax and follow your lead instead of worrying about everything that comes around the corner.

{If your dog is already leash-reactive or pulling like crazy, you may need a few more techniques for working with them on walks. Contact us for a training session.}



Remember: Your dog will love you no matter what, because you are their person. ❤

You don't need to suck up to them with toys and treats or by letting them get away with things because of their past. Your dog won't hold a grudge against you if you enforce the rules, or walk a disciplined walk - they will thank you for taking the lead and being clear and consistent.