

Baby Steps for Success with your Rescue

Many families welcomed new puppies and dogs during the pandemic, many of which were from rescue organizations. While the motivation to rescue a dog is admirable, it can be a big change for everyone! In most cases, it will become a positive one – what's better than saving a dog that needs a good home? However, for the dog, the stress of moving into this new home is still very real! Patience and the cooperation of all family members is the key to success in the dog's training!

Realistic timelines and expectations are critical.

Many people want to help the new family member to immediately be their best. In a well-intentioned way, families often want to start training right away. Meanwhile, the dog is still in a state of stress from the move. Stress hormones make it very hard (if not impossible) to learn. This is why it is critical to set your immediate training goals to a level that the dog realistically attain.

A recently adopted dog may have had a difficult past and, even if they didn't, moving to a new environment with people they don't know or trust can be stressful. They need time to decompress and acclimate to all things new. It's important to give them at least 2-3 weeks after coming into your home before asking too much of them.

Slow and steady is the way to go when building behaviours and cooperation!

"Capturing" desired behaviours at this stage is the best route to building skills and a strong bond. When the dog settles on their bed on their own, praise 'Good Settle/bed!' and drop a treat beside them. When they sit instead of jumping up on you – praise and treat! Just saying 'NO' doesn't teach them a desired behaviour. Even if they approach but don't jump – they need high praise!

Capture the behaviours that you do want to be repeated so they know which behaviours get your approval and a treat.

Most handling issues with new dogs in the home relate to the dog's apprehension and lack of trust. They might not want to be groomed, leashed up, picked up, or dressed to protect from the cold or rain, despite your best intentions. We don't know what those things meant to the dog in their previous home – they may have no experience at all, or they could have had a negative experience.

Remember that dogs, regardless of size, aren't stuffed animals – please be sure to teach and remind children of this! Quick, unpredictable movements can be uncomfortable for many dogs. Be sure to gain the dog's attention and cooperation before picking them up or moving them and be aware of any physical discomfort when lifted. They should never be picked up from behind. This can be frightening for them, as they're suddenly off their feet and restrained. Picking them up from behind can build future resistance and compromise trust.

It's important that the handler remain calm and patient - TAKE YOUR TIME when handling new dogs, to build their acceptance of the handling and trust that you won't hurt them.

Break things into small portions. For example, if you're trying to get the dog used to wearing a coat, show them the coat, put treats on it on the ground and let them investigate. Don't put it on immediately. You can drape it on their back and give a treat while it's there. Be sure to keep your voice and movements slow and calm. If they are too frightened to take the treat or are afraid of the coat, don't push things. Be patient and try again another day.

Add play into your interactions and training.

Play can be taught and is an important marker in the progress of a rescue dog who may have been too shut down to engage in it. When we see them start to engage with a toy, it lets us know that they are on their way to recovery. Play also stimulates the release of endorphins, the happy hormones, and has been shown to help lay down a more durable memory of learned behaviour chains when compared to just treats-based rewards. Playing with your dog - whether it's tug, fetch, interactive games, or hide and seek (as examples) can go a long way in relationship building. It can also help the dog 'shake off' the stress of learning, or a pressured situation. Training the dogs to do tricks that employ physical behaviours can go a long way towards helping both the dog and the owner find some fun in their training session. We want to create the perception that training can be more of a game than work.

The most common concerns I encounter with new dogs in the home include:

- **Moving the dog when it's resting.**

Reactivity often increases when dogs are suddenly moved or disturbed from their resting spot. Would you want someone to startle you while you were sleeping? To avoid any adverse reaction from the dog being startled, it's important the whole family agrees that the dog shouldn't be disturbed when sleeping – at all, but gently awakened first, no matter how well intended the person is. **Hugging while asleep is unfair to the dog and can be dangerous to the human!** This is especially important to teach young children who may look at the new dog as an adorable stuffed animal to cuddle.

We can't be in a hurry to move a sleeping dog but rather need to take our time and build their acceptance that good things happen when they're moved and that they'll have time to wake up. Call their name first to let them know that you're there and hold a tasty treat under their nose to rouse them, without a startle reaction. Then lightly touch their back with a gentle stroke. This may be even more important as a dog ages – they might sleep more deeply, and their hearing might be diminished.

The old saying of "let sleeping dogs lie" probably arose from some unhappy experiences and should be heeded!

- **MINE!**

High-value resources and guarding is a common concern. There are many tips online which advocate teaching your dog that you're in charge and a frequent – but incorrect one tells owners to put their hands in the food bowl while the dog is eating. **Please don't do this!** You don't need to be alpha but, instead, a kind and fair parental figure. To get them used to you being near their "treasure", call their

name as you come near and toss an extra treat in the bowl. Your presence is now a signal of a better thing arriving, not that they are going to lose their treasure or that they need to guard it.

Thank you for rescuing a dog in need and, with these small steps, you can help them become such wonderful and happy family members!



Lucinda Glenny, MSc. Animal Behaviour, HBSc. Psych., CPDT-KA,
Accredited Behaviourist (caninebehaviour.ca)