

When the trainer brain and dog mom brain collide

There is something very humbling about being a dog trainer with a new rescue dog.

People often assume that because I'm a trainer, bringing home a rescue dog must have been easier for me. That I would know exactly what to do and exactly how to help him settle in. But honestly? At times it was emotional, messy and eye-opening.

Duke came into my life unexpectedly. I had thought about adding another dog at some point and actually had given up on the idea of a second dog. Duke was a client's new rescue, and they decided to gift him to me. A two-year-old Border Collie/Australian Shepherd mix is not the ideal starter dog, so instead of being posted on Kijiji, he was suddenly standing in my kitchen.



That first night, neither of us slept. He paced, panted, cried, wandered the house and stared at me while I lay awake thinking, "What have I done?" And in that moment, I wasn't a trainer. I was just a person who had brought home a rescue dog and was suddenly questioning all of my life choices.

Although we were his third home, Duke is actually a really great dog. He's affectionate, social, goofy, eager to learn, great with dogs off leash and honestly just fun to live with. Most of the time, he's happy, relaxed and loving life. But like many rescue dogs, there are little "blips" that show up along the way. Little moments where you suddenly realize there's another layer underneath the surface. That's where the trainer hat versus dog mom hat really started showing up for me.

Because the trainer side of me already knew all of this. I teach decompression all the time. I talk constantly about overstimulation and how too much activity can actually create more barking, more reactivity and more difficulty settling. I already knew that less is often more.

But then the dog mom side of me would kick in.

He's a young Border Collie mix! Surely he needs more exercise, more running, more stimulation. So I would do more.

And almost every single time, the exact opposite would happen. The barking out the windows increased. He became more hypervigilant. He had more difficulty settling and focusing. The panting would increase outside and he would start scanning more and more instead of actually engaging with me calmly.

What was interesting is that Duke wasn't outwardly reactive in the way many people picture. He wasn't lunging and barking at dogs or exploding at every trigger. In fact, most people probably would have thought he was fine.

But when my trainer hat was on, I could see it.

For the first couple of weeks, he couldn't even respond to his name outside because his brain was just trying to process everything around him. One of the clearest examples of this was the first time I brought him into a pet store. In my head, I thought, "This will be fine." Instead, it was a complete disaster. He completely lost his mind, grabbed a chew immediately and started wolfing it down right there in the store. I could see instantly that trying to take it away would likely create resource guarding, so I just let him have it, paid for it and left.

That moment told me a lot. Not that Duke was a "bad" dog, but that the outside world was still far too overwhelming for him in that moment.

Even play was interesting to watch. Duke will play with dogs and enjoys being around them, but there's often still this slight edge to him outdoors, like he's never fully able to exhale. Again, my dog mom brain would think, "But he loves to play," while my trainer brain quietly reminded me to actually look at the dog in front of me and he was a little socially awkward.

And every single time I slowed things down, things improved.

That has probably been the biggest thing Duke reinforced for me. Not taught me, because I already knew it intellectually, but solidified emotionally. Less really can be more.

I continue to focus more on helping him feel calm and regulated. We do lots of sniffing walks, exploring in calm areas and simply existing in the environment without constantly needing to accomplish something or see something new. Very early on, I started teaching him pattern games like 1-2-3 because predictability helps him tremendously. We use engage/disengage when he notices dogs, people or anything exciting in the environment. Those games help him know what to do when the world starts feeling too big.

When he stays under threshold and feels safe enough to think, everything changes. The barking decreases dramatically. Instead of spiraling at every noise outside, he might bark once and then come back to me. He settles more easily, focuses better and just seems more comfortable in the world.

That doesn't mean there aren't still things we work on. Duke is still a young herding mix and honestly, some days it feels like living with a caffeinated toddler.

For example, Duke is wonderful with dogs off leash, but I don't do leash greetings with him because I can see that close on-leash interactions create tension. We use distance instead. We move, observe and keep walking.

The same thing applies at home with Galaxy. Thankfully, she accepted Duke far more easily than I expected, but we still manage things carefully. They eat separately. Gates stay up. Bully sticks and Kongs are supervised or given separately. Could they probably handle those things together now? More than likely. But again, my trainer brain knows that management is not failure. Preventing conflict is easier than repairing it and it's only been six months.

Another interesting piece of all of this is that I had never actually lived with two dogs before. As a trainer, I help dogs coexist all the time. But emotionally living inside of it is completely different. There are moments where my dog mom brain wants them to instantly become best friends, and then my trainer brain steps back in and reminds me not to push the relationship. To let it happen organically while still providing guidance and structure.

And honestly, that approach has worked really well.

The other thing Duke has reminded me is that rescue dogs continue unfolding over time. Even months later, new little things can still pop up. Recently, we've started working on people coming through the door — specifically men entering the house, which Duke finds difficult.

I think that's important for people with rescue dogs to hear because sometimes behaviours don't appear immediately. Sometimes dogs need weeks or months before they feel safe enough to fully communicate how they feel about certain situations.

But what Duke continues to show me is that progress usually comes in very small moments. A dog settling a little sooner. One bark instead of twenty. Looking out the window and then walking away. Choosing to come back to you instead of staying stuck in the environment.

Those moments add up.

And suddenly, without even realizing it, the dog who once felt overwhelmed by everything starts looking a little more comfortable, a little safer and a little more at home.

And honestly, that's the hope I want people with rescue dogs to hold onto. It doesn't have to be perfect overnight. Sometimes the biggest transformations happen quietly, slowly and almost without you noticing.



Andrea Dinan
Certified Dog Behavior Consultant

CDBC, FFCT, KAD-PA, FDM
Award-Winning Certified Dog Trainer
andrea@citydogs.ca