



Common Mistakes When Bringing Home a Rescue Dog

Everyone knows that adopting a dog from a shelter or a rescue, saves animals' lives. Social media feeds are packed with heartwarming stories of shelters and rescues adopting out large numbers of dogs to their forever homes, it's feel-good central and we eat it up.

What people don't talk about as much, however, is what the first few weeks at home with their new dog are like, particularly if it's difficult. And even less talked about is the fact that many dogs, about 20% according to some statistics, are returned to the rescues and shelters. Not only does this put a strain on the resources of the rescues and the shelters, it puts a strain on the dog being bounced around so much.

When a group of professional dog trainers in Northern California decided to select four dogs from the county animal shelter to foster, train and place in forever homes, they were all reminded how easy it would be to fall prey to the common mistakes many well meaning adopters make when bringing home a new rescue dog.

These common mistakes are probably opposite of what you might think.

The four dogs chosen were Olaf, a highly desirable and handsome pure-bred German Shepherd, Elsa, an eight month old, snuggly pit bull, and Crystal and Snow, two adorable little mixed breed dogs that would make great companions. The basic criteria when choosing these dogs were that they appeared to like people as well as other dogs and that there were no obvious signs of aggression.

When taking our newly adopted dogs home, how we manage them will determine if the integration of these dogs into a family type setting goes smoothly, or if it goes, well, to the dogs.

First, let's take a look at Elsa, the kissable 8-month-old pit bull who went home with trainer Jackie.

According to Jackie, as soon as they walked in the door, Elsa happily trotted over to the couch, hopped on, and looked about as at-home as you could imagine. Jackie

said that if Elsa had thumbs she probably would have grabbed the remote and turned on the TV.

It would have been easy for Jackie to just leave Elsa there, what with that precious, kissable face and all. After all, a dog fresh out of the shelter needs freedom and the comforts of a couch so that they can feel welcome, right? Wrong...

Common Mistake #1

Not providing rules, structure and boundaries.

The last thing Elsa needs is a plethora of choices in the furniture department, instead Elsa needs direction. What starts out as self-inviting to the couch can lead to other pushy and undesirable behaviors such as jumping on people or claiming ownership of valuable spaces like couches or beds in a guarding type of way. It is important to remember that we don't know anything about Elsa's true behavior and tendencies, and we won't for a few weeks.

Remedy? Jackie (who hadn't yet taken the leash off Elsa...more on that in a minute) simply and quietly led Elsa off the couch. And when Elsa tried to jump up again because certainly Jackie was mistaken for expecting Elsa to not jump on the couch, Jackie repeated the calm removal, this time leading Elsa to her bed. When Elsa stepped onto her bed, Jackie praised Elsa by saying "good girl!" And remember, Elsa, not being human, doesn't get hurt feelings because she's being relegated to a bed made especially for her on the floor.

The reason Jackie was able to calmly show Elsa what she wanted from her was because Elsa was wearing a leash, and that brings us to our next common mistake.

Common Mistake #2

Not enforcing boundaries

A dog coming home from the cooped-up confines of the shelter needs freedom and free rein in order to "get to know" her new home, right? Nope...

Elsa needs boundaries, because too much freedom can be very overwhelming to a new dog. An overwhelmed dog can develop fear and anxiety, and when in a new environment, an overwhelmed dog tends to urinate, even if they are housebroken. They may be marking their new territory or they may urinate just because they are scared and don't know what else they're supposed to do.

It is our duty to make sure we've set up an environment where our new dog can't make a mistake by chewing the computer cord or the arm of the couch, for example. When we have inconsistent and unclear boundaries for our dogs, we encourage the development of all kinds of unwanted behaviors and other problems to develop that helps to keep us dog trainers employed.

Feeling overwhelmed by the brand new environment, the new sights, sounds and smells can also cause a lot of dogs to behave in a very reserved manner, often leading new adopters to believe they've hit the jackpot and brought home the most mellow dog in the shelter. By not providing any structure or boundaries for this mellow and reserved pup, the adopters are setting themselves up to witness a re-birth of their newly adopted dog, a few weeks later when Mr. Mellow turns into the Tasmanian Devil.

The ideal set-up for your newly adopted dog is an area in a centrally located room, like the kitchen or family room. This small area should be blocked off with a gate. A crate is an even better idea, especially if the dog requires remedial house training. Crates are a wonderful training and management tool and they appeal to a dog's natural nesting instinct. Most dogs quickly learn that a crate with a nice comfy bed inside is a safe place to rest. Please keep in mind that if your dog has a strong aversion to the crate because she appears extremely stressed at the sight of it, you don't need to abandon the crate as an option, but you'll need the help of a dog behavior professional so as to not cause the aversion to the crate to become worse.

When you have to leave the dog alone for short periods of time, the crate is the safest place. Nobody gets into trouble. When you have to leave for long periods of time, you'll need to make sure the dog has a reasonably sized space, like an area of a room that doesn't contain a bunch of tempting-but-forbidden items that might get chewed on. Under no circumstances should your newly adopted dog ever have free run of the house while you are gone. Aside from the destruction and dangerous things they may get into, a dog with free run of the house can develop territorial guarding behaviors due to lack of management and boundaries.

When you are home and supervising your new dog, the dog should be wearing a drag line which is a leash without a knot or loop at the end to get caught on furniture, etc. This drag line enables you to lead your dog outside for potty breaks, or to remind her to stay off the couch or to teach her come when called, among other things.

You will need to plan on employing these boundaries for several weeks at the very least. Jackie said it was a month before she let Elsa have any free access to the house, and even then Jackie would call Elsa into view when she popped out of sight.

Common Mistake #3

Not starting and keeping up some kind of daily exercise routine with your new dog.

Snow, is a little mixed breed dog who is very perky. Snow went home with Mandy who is an agility trainer. Mandy has a lot of big dogs, primarily border collies, and because of this, Mandy already has the ideal set-up in her home to enforce rules and provide boundaries.

It would have been easy for Mandy to make a common mistake with Snow in the area of exercise. When she first got home to Mandy's, Snow was the perfect example of the "jackpot" pup, mellow and accommodating.

As mentioned earlier, some dogs go through a “honeymoon” period when they first arrive in their newly adopted home, where they are not their usual energetic selves. They are busy processing all kinds of new information, which is exhausting. This leads many new adopters to believe that their new dog just doesn’t require much exercise, which brings us to the next common mistake.

One thing that makes combating Common Mistake #2 (enforcing boundaries) a little easier is a regular exercise routine. Exercise and mental stimulation encourage relaxation, and a relaxed dog is a dog that’s easier to manage indoors.

One of the most pleasurable things you can do with your new dog is to start the bonding process with each other. You can start with this exercise: Grab some treats and take your dog outside on a six foot long leash. Every time your dog looks at you, praise her and reward with a treat. Every time she walks toward you, praise her and reward with a treat or a good ear scratching. This will help provide some mental stimulation for your dog in addition to helping form a bond between you and your new best friend.

If you combine this activity with a 30-minute leash walk, you’ll most likely be meeting your new dog’s exercise needs, or at least you’ll be getting a sense of what those needs might be. This should be kept up, even when the novelty of walking and working with your new dog wears off, which it will, especially when it’s cold outside.

Trainer, Mandy can’t resist training a “blank slate” and she had Snow doing all kinds of “work” within a few days. She said Snow was actually really smart and loved to learn - not just obedience commands but fun tricks as well. Many people don’t think of small dogs as requiring mental stimulation, because weren’t little dogs made specifically to just sit on your lap? NOPE... Little dogs can have big attitudes and this brings us to the next common mistake.

Common Mistake #4

Allowing free access to possessions.

Crystal is an adorable little Chihuahua who went home with trainer, Chris. According to Chris, Crystal clearly saw herself as queen of the castle who thought she was in charge of everyone. It was obvious that someone had previously made a few common mistakes with Crystal, particularly Common Mistake #4, allowing free access to possessions, in other words, spoiling her with lots of high-value toys and treats without setting any rules about access to them. Big mistake.

Resource or possession guarding is one of the most serious problems we dog trainers deal with in our small-dog clients. Many new adopters feel like the quickest way to their new dog’s heart is through “spoiling”. This also includes giving access to high-value places, such as the couch, or your lap, without any access rules.

Chris has other dogs at home and Crystal immediately went into queen mode, claiming all kinds of possessions around the house. Chris said she hadn't been home more than 30 minutes and Queen Crystal settled herself on the end of the couch and proceeded to "defend" her space as the other dogs approached to say hello. This problem can become very serious as dogs will also defend spaces and possessions not just from other dogs, but from people as well.

Remedy: Chris set Crystal up in a nice big pen (boundaries) and immediately started "trading" with her. She would approach Crystal with a treat, say "take it" and then give her the treat, establishing herself as the human Pez Dispenser of goodness. This got Crystal's attention. After a few repetitions, Chris gave Crystal a toy, and then approached her with a treat and said "take it," basically "trading" Crystal her toy for the treat. This reinforced the concept that Chris represented giving things and not just taking them away. This is a great exercise but it must be practiced in tandem with boundaries and structure. Crystal cannot have free access to the couch, nor be given a high-value treat like a bone, until it has been established that she will give it up without defending it. This takes time, usually months. Crystal also had to learn that she couldn't sit like a queen on a lap and be allowed to tell the other dogs to "go away". Our laps and the personal space around our bodies can be viewed as a high-value resource to a dog and by not controlling access to those areas, we allow our dogs to claim ownership.

That takes us to everybody's favorite foster dog, Olaf and our next common mistake.

Common Mistake #5

Allowing invasion of personal space and giving excessive affection, aka: spoiling.

Olaf, the young German Shepherd presented himself at the shelter as super shy and subdued. Olaf went home with trainer Kristy. Three days in, when asked how he was doing, Kristy said "he's lucky he's cute, and he's lucky I love shepherds, because he's driving me crazy!"

A dog from the shelter or rescue must have had a horrible life where he was abused or neglected, and needs lots love and affection to make up for it so that they can flourish, correct? NOPE...

Olaf was driving Kristy crazy because he attached himself to her hip. She couldn't move without him tripping her. Olaf is what is referred to as a "Velcro dog." Because of his anxiety and fear, Olaf latches on to whoever is closest to him, and not in a healthy way. He crowded Kristy's other dogs as well.

Dogs instinctively teach each other what lines not to cross when it comes to their personal space. They are much better at teaching each other, then we are at teaching them. We humans give our dogs mixed signals. One day we allow them to "snuggle" on us, uninvited, which is allowing them to invade our personal space, or we allow

them to follow us into the restroom, also uninvited, but then we get irritated when we trip over them in the kitchen.

With a dog like Olaf, well-meaning new adopters mistakenly think they're offering security to their new dog by allowing these behaviors when they're really nurturing unbalanced and anxious behaviors. These behaviors can be the start of separation anxiety, or they can launch a dog on to the path of guarding the human as a valuable resource.

Olaf needed to learn to become confident standing on his own, he also needed to become aware of his size and the personal space requirements of the children, adults and other dogs around him. He needed to learn to be a normal dog with structure and boundaries.

Remedy: Kristy set up a comfy space for Olaf in her garage where her other dogs spend time when not being supervised in the house. Everyone gets a crate, a comfy bed, stuff to do, and outdoor access to potty, it is the ideal dog set-up.

When in the house, Kristy used a tie-down to safely tether Olaf to an area where he could lay on a dog bed and just hang out and watch everything that was going on around him. By ignoring Olaf, except to occasionally praise him for lying quietly, Olaf had the opportunity to simply observe while laying there, which in turn will help build his confidence. Kristy could bring in her other dogs, send them to their beds, and Olaf got to see how a people-centered and dog-friendly household runs.

All of these common mistakes well meaning adopters make with their new dogs have to do with boundaries and structure. We cannot stress enough, the importance of starting your relationship with your new dog with these things in mind. It takes a few months to really get to know a new dog and if you put in the management up front, you will avoid the pitfalls that lead to so many dogs being unnecessarily returned to the shelter or rescue.