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You and Your Rescue:

Navigating the First Weeks after Adopting a Dog

Imagine living for days, weeks or months in an environment with constant changes in sounds, smells, people and dogs. Maybe you've been in a home before, maybe you've been living as a stray. And now you've been adjusting to shelter life. There has been a bit of stress lately to say the least.

And your routine is about to change again. A new person takes you from the shelter and brings you into a new home. All the surroundings, including the people inside the home, are new. You have no knowledge of your new home's rules or schedule. Everything is unknown.

This situation would be traumatic for any person, and would arguably require the support of a myriad of social services to help that person cope. This is a common situation for many dogs who are adopted from shelters. Although a dog may have come from the best possible shelter and is entering a loving home, the change in environment will undoubtedly cause stress. Most dogs don't have a support team to see them through the storm, but they do have you and are depending on you to guide them through this transition period.

The time following any adoption is critical – not simply because you and your dog are getting to know each other, but because you are laying the foundation for your dog's new life. While the transition from a shelter to a new home will always be a considerable change for a dog, there are ways to make the journey more comfortable and soothing. The following is a guide to help you prepare for your adoption and lay the foundation for a successful transition for your dog.

Plan Ahead

The day you bring home your adopted dog is a big one, as both you and your dog will be under an adjustment period. By planning ahead and readying your home, you will ease the transition. Make sure you have the essential equipment and supplies for your dog's first week:

- Soft, comfortable bedding is essential for senior dogs, and giving your dog several places in the house to snooze will help him relax. If your dog isn't a senior, he will still appreciate some designated cozy spots!

- Set aside a place for water and food bowls.
- Check what food your dog has been eating, and whether he has any allergies. If you want to change his food, be sure to do so gradually so as not to distress his digestive system. Don't forget to stock up on treats to use for training and rewards! Food and treats are available for purchase in Norm's Nook at the shelter.
- Get a properly fitting harness (such as the EasyWalk), as well as a sturdy five- to six- foot leash. To ensure your pet's safety, purchase ID tags to place on his collar along with his microchip tag. Familiarize yourself with your local Bylaws and register your dog if required.
- Install gates and barriers to keep your dog out of hazardous areas of the home.
- Stock a pet first aid kit and first aid guide in case of emergencies, as well as phone numbers for your vet and local pet hospital.
- Depending on your dog's age and temperament, toys are a great way to provide stimulation and comfort. Plush toys, Kongs and puzzle games are great options.

House set-up

- Think about your home's floor-plan and where your dog will live. Will he be allowed in all rooms? Will he sleep in his own bed or under the covers of yours? Where will your dog stay when left alone? Making these decisions ahead of time not only helps you determine where to place beds and gates, but also reduces anxiety for you and your dog on the big day.
- Give your dog some "safe spaces" in the home. Provide treats, puzzle toys and bedding, and reward him whenever he goes to these areas. This will help your dog settle in and feel more comfortable in his new environment.

Set aside time

- Your dog will undergo a significant adjustment when you bring him home. He has been under environmental and emotional stress, and will need time to adjust to new people and surroundings.
- Keep your schedule free for several days after your adoption, and avoid inviting lots of people over to your house. Even though everyone will be excited to meet the new family member, your dog needs time and a calm environment to adjust to his new home.

House training

- Your dog may or may not be house trained. We can provide you with our house training handout as a resource.
- Even if your dog is house trained, be prepared for some accidents. Stress, change in environment, and anxiety can all lead to house training lapses.
- Set your dog up for success by heavily rewarding (praise and tasty treats) each time he eliminates outside. If you catch your dog in the act, don't punish, but simply pick him up and immediately take him outside to finish. Reward if he finishes outside. If your dog has an accident and you don't catch him in the act, don't punish after the fact; your dog will not remember the accident and will not understand why he is being punished.
- If your dog continues having accidents, check with your vet for any underlying medical conditions that could be causing incontinence. This is especially important if you have adopted a senior dog.

Absences and anxiety

- Some dogs may experience some anxiety after the adoption. This is no surprise since changes to the environment, the addition of new people or dogs into the home, and past trauma are all triggers for this behavior.
- Practice brief absences during the initial settling-in period. As part of this practice, go through your ritual before leaving the house. Dogs quickly learn your routine and quickly predict when you are about to leave.
- If you have taken some days off work, be sure to leave your dog at random periods throughout the day, starting with short increments and mixing in some longer ones of 5-10 minutes. Don't make your dog's first absence be an 8-hour workday, as that will be quite stressful for him!
- When introducing the absences, keep your dog occupied with toys and treats. Kongs stuffed with peanut butter and then placed in the freezer make great long-lasting treats, as do puzzle toys filled with irresistible treats like freeze-dried liver or chicken.
- Keep goodbyes and greetings low key to help manage your dog's anxiety.
- Many dogs will show some symptoms of discomfort at being left alone immediately following the adoption, including whining, some barking, and waiting at the door. Some of these dogs will overcome this initial anxiety as they settle into their new environment, whereas other dogs will not. If your dog's symptoms persist or worsen, get in touch with a trainer or your shelter to get further support. Rest assured, separation anxiety is by no means insurmountable, but, like any other fear-based behavior, needs extra attention.

Communication and Structure

- Dogs do not know inherently how we want them to behave. In fact, many behaviours we identify as "problems" are quite simply dogs acting like dogs. (Think resource guarding, chewing, and marking.) It is our responsibility to teach dogs how we want them to behave, and to teach them in ways they understand. Animal Behaviourist Jean Donaldson's book "Culture Clash" is a terrific resource for learning how to communicate with dogs and understanding why they behave the way they do, and is an immensely valuable read for any dog owner. It is available in Norm's Nook at the shelter.
- If your dog does something you love, and you want him to continue doing in the future, reward him! Lavishing with praise and treats immediately after the desired behaviour communicates to your dog that he should do this behavior again!
- If your dog does something you do not want him to repeat, give him a replacement behaviour to do instead. For example, if your dog jumps on you when you come home, teach him to sit as a replacement for jumping. If your dog loves chewing on your shoes, give him a toy or bone to chew on instead. A trainer can help you with this, as well as teach you about positive reinforcement training techniques. Never use pain, fear or force to modify your dog's behaviour.
- Learn to recognize when your dog is afraid. When your dog is afraid, nothing else matters to him. Because fear is such a powerful emotion, he could care less about previously learned obedience behaviours or any commands you may give him. Comforting your dog when he is afraid will not reinforce his fear. On the contrary, when dealing with any type of fear-based behaviour, it is paramount to address the fear first.

Patience

- It can take a shelter dog 6-8 weeks, or more, to fully adjust to his new home. Do not worry if his behaviour does not fall into place after the first week, or if it takes a while for him to feel like your dog.
- Listen to your dog. He will let you know if he is uncomfortable or if he needs his space. Tell friends and family to let your dog approach them on his own time, and reward him with treats when he does. The same goes for other dogs in the neighbourhood. As much as you might want him to develop a host of new friends right away, he needs time to feel at ease.
- Make it your goal to help your dog form positive associations to everything in his new environment. Have treats and praise at the ready. If you're taking out the vacuum cleaner for the first time, dole out treats. If the noisy garbage truck drives by, praise and treat. If a kid crosses the street on a skateboard, praise and treat. And so forth. Even if your dog is an adult, these socialization techniques can help ease anxiety.

Training Classes

Cochrane & Area Humane Society offer a full complement of dog training. Classes covering obedience including Puppy Obedience, Get Started Obedience and Beyond Basics are regularly offered. For other fun activities to do with your dog, check out our specialty classes such as Agility, Reliable Recalls & Loose Leash Walking and Tricks & Brain Games. Our class size is kept small ensuring a high student ratio with our certified dog trainers. Private training and behaviour consultations are also offered.

Please call us at 403 932-2072 or check out our website for more information at <http://www.cochranehumane.ca/programs/dog-training-and-behaviour>.

Needing to stock up on supplies for your new family member? Please check out Norm's Nook at the shelter for a great selection of supplies including:

- Dog food
- Treats
- Collars, leashes and harnesses
- Kongs and toys
- Books

From all of us at the Cochrane & Area Humane Society, we wish you and your new canine family member a long and happy life together. Wag On!