

Welcome

Helping a recently adopted dog
adjust to new surroundings

Patricia B. McConnell



Barbara came to me in despair. Her foot bobbed up and down as she told me about the troubles she'd been having with her newly adopted dog, Isabelle. A mop of a dog – maybe 15 pounds of dog and five pounds of fur – Isabelle had been adopted from a foster home a month or so previously. Isabelle was a lovely little dog, sweet and friendly, but she was driving Barbara and her husband crazy. “She’s five years old and she still pees in the house; won’t come in from the backyard when called; and just last night, chewed up one of my favorite books. My husband is losing patience and I have to admit, I’m almost to the end of my rope too.”

Barbara is not alone, and believe it or not, in some ways, that’s a wonderful thing. Glory hallelujah, it’s becoming more and more common for people to adopt adolescent or adult dogs – usually from shelters and rescue groups, but sometimes from neighbors, breeders or friends whose dogs just need a better life. No matter where they come from, adolescent and adult dogs (from five to six months on) present a different set of challenges than do nine week-old puppies. There are two guiding principles to keep in mind when adopting a partially or fully grown dog.

Perhaps the most important is to be mindful of one’s expectations. Trainers and behaviorists see it all the time: young puppies get “puppy passes” for what is labeled misbehavior, but there’s an entirely different set of expectations for dogs who have grown past the “cute” stage. For example, no one expects a nine week-old puppy to be house-trained (well, most people don’t, anyway), but it’s common to be frustrated and irritated when an adult dog has an “accident.” (“He’s a grown-up; how could he pee in the living room?”) I suspect that this is one of those cases in which we mix up our species. I’d be the first to fall down in shock if an adult person urinated in my living room, but dogs aren’t furry people, and just because they’ve been house-trained in one location doesn’t mean they will generalize it to another. That’s true even of well-raised dogs if they haven’t spent much time in several different houses, and it’s a particular problem for dogs who have been forced to eliminate in their living space. (After all, many of us have had a dog who lifted a leg on a Christmas tree, right?)

Even Cool Hand Luke, my one-in-a-million dog, was a challenge to house-train. He spent his first year of life in a kennel before I got him and was allowed out just once a day to eat and potty. Not surprisingly, things didn’t go smoothly when he began living in my house. Never were his problems better illustrated than when I took him with me to a puppy socialization class I was teaching. I’d had him about six months or so, and he was lovely, just lovely, with puppies, so I brought him along. Luke and I were standing side by side when a woman approached with one

of those big-boned, big-eyed, fawn-colored Labrador pups who make you go all melty. While I cooed to the little dog, Luke lifted his leg and peed on the woman's ankle. Mutually shocked, she and I looked at each other; then, finally, I said with a straight face, "If you come to all of my classes and work really hard, you too can have a dog as well trained as Luke!" Lucky for me, she burst out laughing, and continued in class without asking for her money back.

Many rescued dogs have far better manners than Luke did when I first got him, but no matter where they come from, we can't expect mature dogs to arrive in our homes problem-free and ready to go. I Both Ends of the Leash guarantee you that (a) most people will respond to that by saying "Of course not!" and (b) most people will start to panic around day eight if their new adult dog isn't pretty close to perfect. This isn't because we're stupid or ignorant; it's because we're people, and we've been conditioned to expect dogs who look like grown-ups to behave in certain ways. But dogs who didn't grow up with us didn't learn our rules, don't generalize the world into the same categories as we do and have no idea what we expect. It usually takes a good three weeks for even the most stable of dogs to settle in, but it often takes six to 12 months to have the dog you thought you were getting. That brings us to the second guiding principle: patience.

Patience is such an important part of melding a new dog into your life that one might become impatient at the number of times Karen London and I mention its virtues in our new book, *Love Has No Age Limit*. But "have patience" is a mantra that everyone, professional and novice alike, would be wise to repeat on a daily (hourly?) basis. While you're at it, bring along Patience's best friend, Faith, because you're going to need that too. Faith that no, you haven't made a horrendous mistake; that yes, your new dog really will stop pacing and whining; and that eventually, life will settle down and your mutual angst will evolve into the contentment of a cozy pack. This is not to say you won't have things to work on, or even perhaps need the advice of a professional trainer or behaviorist, but in most cases, three to six months down the road, you won't recognize the dog you started with.

Of course, as we all know, patience and faith are not always enough – on rare occasions, you might end up with the wrong dog for you and your family (or you might discover that you're the wrong family for the dog), and you'll have to do what's best for all the lives for which you are responsible. Yet again, you'll need patience and faith to do what you can to create good lives for those dependent upon you, whether that means staying together or finding another solution that works for everyone involved.

While every situation is different, here are a few nuggets of wisdom accumulated by behaviorists and people who have worked for years in shelters and rescue groups that will help smooth your transition from "new dog" to – I hope! – "best-dog-I've-ever had."

Preparation:

Ideally, before you pull into the driveway with your new best friend, you will have taken a tour of your house and decided what's off limits and where the dog will sleep, as well as identified anything that might be dangerous to the dog – or vice versa – and picked it up. You will have acquired a crate, good dog food, bowls, some great, healthy treats for training and a few toys. (Don't break the bank on supplies until you get to know your dog better.)

Driving home:

If possible, take a friend or family member along so that one of you can drive and the other can attend to the dog. Put the dog in a crate if at all possible, and be sure to leave his collar AND leash on so you don't end up with a surprise escape as you open the door.

Once you arrive:

Keep the dog on leash, even if you have a fenced yard, and spend time letting him sniff around and eliminate if he's so inclined. It's common for dogs who are a bit nervous not to urinate in unfamiliar places, so be patient; if he won't pee, take him inside but keep a close eye on him. If you have other pets, avoid surprise greetings in the house. Let dogs greet each other outside where there's space and freedom to move around, and then invite the newcomer to go inside first. Confine your cat in another room to avoid cartoon-like chases in which the dog learns that the cat is his favorite toy and the cat learns that the dog is a monster. Ask others to be friendly but low-key; avoid swamping the dog, and avoid the kissing and hugging that we humans love to impose on helpless canines.

House-training 101:

Yup, even if you brought home a 10-year old dog who has never had an accident in the house in his life, you still need to make housetraining job one for a while. Treat any new dog as though he were a puppy; take him out frequently, give him treats for eliminating outside and restrict him to the part of the house in which you spend most of your time. When you're gone, confine him to a crate or a small area in which he's either unlikely to go or where he can't do much harm. This might all be accomplished in a day or two, but better to start out right than be dealing with it months later. If, like Cool Hand Luke, your new dog had a difficult start, this may take some time, but if you are vigilant and thoughtful, it can almost always be handled or managed. Stay alert. One of the most common problems reported by rescue groups and shelters is dogs who bolt out of doorways or through fences and cannot be persuaded to come back when called. Until you know your dog better, come up with a plan to prevent surprise excursions into the neighborhood. Gate off areas leading to often-used doors and carefully examine your fenced yard for even the tiniest of escape holes. (You might be amazed at how inadequate most fences are – I know I was when I first started doing consults and watched a Chesapeake Bay Retriever go through a hole I didn't think a Tea Cup Poodle could fit into.)

Be respectful:

You may have spent a long time deciding that you were ready for a new dog, but your dog wasn't necessarily prepared for a new relationship, so go slow. Be friendly and loving, but don't overwhelm your new dog with visitors, petting and constant attention. It's tiring to adapt to a new environment, and many dogs are overwhelmed by the changes they've been through in their recent past. Imagine that you're dating someone you really, really like, and remember what your mother said about not trying to push him or her into a relationship too fast! Your dog may be in love with you in 24 hours, or it might take a few weeks (and in some cases, a few months)...did I mention being patient?

Training is critical:

Your dog is always learning, so in one sense, you are always training him. Don't expect to have a performance dog in a few weeks, but decide right away which behaviors are the most important to you. Perhaps your list includes eliminating outside, responding to his name, walking well on a leash and not jumping up on visitors. Start right away, but be extra sure that your training methods are fun and rewarding. Focus on a few things that you'd like your dog to master, and work on them using treats, petting (if the dog loves it) and appropriate play. However, wait to enroll your dog in group classes until you know him better; group classes can be frightening to dogs, especially if they have not been well-socialized, so work privately with a trainer if need be before taking the dog to a class. To vet or not to vet. Some dogs come to their new homes in desperate need of medical care, and in that case, you have no choice but to do whatever needs to be done. But if your dog has no immediate healthcare needs, set up an appointment at your vet clinic for a "meet and greet," during which the staff (and veterinarian if possible) quietly make friends with your dog while giving him some yummy treats. You want him to leave wishing he could stay longer, and wondering when he might be so lucky as to return. Remember, first impressions...

Where'd my perfect dog go?

Many dogs are somewhat inhibited when they first come into a new environment, especially if they've had a relatively isolated life, so don't be surprised if your dog behaves differently on Day 21 than he did on Day One. Many dogs need at least three weeks under their collars to begin to relax in a new home, and the more sensitive souls need a good three months. (A profoundly damaged dog, perhaps one who grew up in a small cage and was never let out, can take more than a year to come into his own.)

Did we get the wrong dog?

It's not uncommon for a dog to behave differently than the shelter or foster family described. Perhaps the foster family told you he was perfectly house-trained, but now he's urinating in the back bedroom. Or maybe the shelter's behavioral evaluation showed no signs of possessiveness around food, but suddenly, he's growling at your children over his dinner bowl. The fact is that behavior is context-dependent, meaning that all animals with flexible repertoires vary their behavior in different environments. We know this intuitively about ourselves: are you the same person at a tense business meeting as you are at home on a Sunday morning? Aren't there places and settings that bring out the worst in you, and others that bring out the best? Dogs especially vary their behavior from a group setting (like a shelter or foster home with lots of dogs) to a home in which they are the only member of their own species. That doesn't mean that evaluations in other contexts aren't valuable. They are, and I'm a supporter of objective well-done behavioral assessments. However, it also means that a dog's behavior in one environment is never 100 percent predictive of his behavior in another. So don't waste energy fussing over how he behaved before you brought him home; spend it observing how he behaves now, and how you can encourage his best traits and modify any potential behavioral issues.

Keep a journal:

A journal, even a simple, casual one, is a great way to help you track your dog's progress. When something changes slowly, it can be difficult to notice it, and there's nothing like keeping a record, whether written or on video, to remind you how far you and your dog have come. I can't tell you how often clients have come in for a follow-up appointment and have actually forgotten the original reason they came to see me. If the initial consultation was about helping the dog be comfortable when home alone, the next might be about barking out the window. "But how is Jake doing when you have to leave him home alone?" I'll ask. "Oh (pause)...he's fine, but his barking at people who walk by is driving us crazy." Recording what's happening is also a great way to help organize your thoughts and look at problems objectively. Take a tip from the pros: we do this with our dogs all the time, knowing that it helps us with our own canine challenges at home, just as it helps our clients with theirs.

In summary, no matter where he comes from, it's a wonderful thing to give a dog a good home. Just remember that bringing home a dog who is beyond puppyhood creates a different set of challenges and opportunities. If you manage your expectations and repeat "patience and faith, patience and faith" on a hourly basis, you're probably going to be fine. If you're lucky, you'll end up with your own one-in-amillion dog, just like I did with Cool Hand Luke.

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