

Adopting a Special Rescue Dog

Puppies who have not been appropriately socialized (meaning that they may not have been lovingly handled and petted, not raised indoors, not given toys, etc.) usually grow up to be fearful and skittish of people and the sights and sounds of what we would consider normal home environments. They typically do best in calm, quiet homes where they can be allowed to slowly adjust at their own pace and begin their journey toward learning to trust. Some dogs will remain fearful and skittish their whole lives, some may become affectionate towards familiar people, and others might become friendly to people in general. Patience, realistic expectations and a good match in a home environment are the keys to success.

The following are a few considerations and challenges that unsocialized dogs and their new families might face.

Children: Many special rescue dogs will probably **not** do well in a home with children or visiting children. Absolutely all interactions with children must be closely supervised by adults who can read dog body language. These dogs could be forced to bite as a response to feeling trapped or cornered, overwhelmed, or pushed beyond their comfort level. They are sensitive to loud noises and fast movements. They could also easily escape your home if doors are accidentally left open.

These dogs are a flight risk. Most special rescue dogs have had no prior experiences with strangers, children, dog parks, the sights and sounds of traffic, or riding in an automobile. We expect them to be overwhelmed by everything they encounter at first. During the critical first weeks or months, their safety will depend on your good judgment and forethought, because **a frightened dog will look for any occasion to bolt when startled: out of vehicles, out the front door, or slipping the leash. Keep a very tight grip of that leash!**

These dogs may not have been on a leash before. In the beginning, your dog may not be able to go for walks in the neighborhood. They will need someone who can take it really slowly with their leash training.

These dogs are often not housetrained. They will need your patience and commitment to help them succeed. These dogs may lack the inherent desire to keep their “den” area clean; therefore using a crate for potty training purposes may not be a viable option at first.

These dogs need to be supervised outside. It is possible that special rescue dogs may escape a well-fenced yard or be difficult to catch if left outside. Since these dogs have never been on a leash, they may not feel comfortable going potty outside with you standing right next to them at first. When you do take your dog outside, leave their leash on so you can pick it up and lead them gently and safely back inside.

Resource Guarding: Special rescue dogs may have lived in crowded conditions, so food (and even water) may be a highly valuable resource and something to fight over with other animals and people. Give food and water in their own separate location. Because of their situation, some of these dogs may always have to be fed separately. Do not give long lasting, high value food treats such as rawhides, raw bones, etc. as these dogs may try to hide them and protect the hiding place.

These dogs probably won't be social butterflies. These dogs will need someone who can take it really slow, and is willing to wait weeks - or even months - before putting them into new, potentially stressful environments and situations.

Tips for Success:

Designate a “safe spot” in your home. Pick an extra room or use an ex-pen/baby gate to confine your dog to a dog-proof area where they have access to water, bed and toys. Give them a “target area” (using paper, puppy pads or an old towel) to teach them how to keep their bed clean and go potty on a designated spot. If you’re unable to supervise your dog, they should be confined to their safe spot.

Clip a very light leash to your dog’s harness and have them drag it around your home for a few weeks or longer. You can gently pick up the handle of the leash and use treats to encourage your dog to take a few steps with you inside the house, and then in your secure, fenced yard. Lots of leash pressure, or attempting to force the issue with them will cause them to panic, backslide and not trust you with the leash. Be patient! Wait until your dog is confidently walking on leash in your yard before attempting a leash walk around the block.

Use treats to build trust. Don’t force interactions. Let your new dog decide when they want to come closer to you. As they grow more comfortable, you can pair treats with petting and practice clipping/unclipping the leash.

If you’re having people over, it’s okay to put your dog in another room. They will slowly relax and not have to worry about interacting with all of the strangers! Once you’ve started walking your dog, don’t take them to places where there are lots of uncontrolled interactions with people or other dogs (dog parks, coffee shops, walks in busy neighborhoods, popular hiking trails, etc.).

Have patience! It will take time for your dog to feel safe and they will need to fully adjust to your home and family before being expected to deal with new people or situations. Keeping low expectations and not rushing the process will help ensure success. Slow introductions and positive reinforcement will be the key.

Additional Resources

- **OHS offers dog training classes and one-on-one training consultations.** Learn more at oregonhumane.org/training.
- **Resources Stress & Anxiety tabs, Adaptil, and Rescue Remedy by Bach Flower Essences** can help dogs settle in new environments by easing the stress associated with change.

Need help? Call our free pet behavior help line at (503) 416-2983.