



HOW TO ACCLIMATIZE A FOREIGN RESCUE DOG

By Lisa Tenzin-Dolma



Articles

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May 23, 2017 Nick Bengner 2 Comments

It's useful to know what to expect when a dog is scheduled to arrive from overseas, whether you're fostering or adopting. If you're prepared to be understanding and patient, this can help your dog to settle in and can lay the foundation for a rewarding relationship.

If you're about to become the first-time guardian of an imported dog you should have received as much information as possible from the rescue that has the dog in its care. However, very few overseas rescues, especially those whose dogs are kept in large shelters, are able to perform an accurate assessment of how a dog will respond in a domestic environment, and usually, testing a dog's responses to the presence of children, cats and other species of animal isn't possible. By preparing yourself and your home for the dog's arrival well beforehand, you'll be setting yourself and your dog up for a smoother settling in period.

[Know the Background: Street Dogs and Feral Dogs](#)

The majority of imported rescue dogs are street dogs, but some feral dogs are also sent over for homing. **Street dogs are used to the presence of people and traffic, and may be friendly and keen to interact, whereas feral dogs are unfamiliar with having humans in close proximity and tend to be extremely fearful during the first weeks or months.** Whether a dog is from the streets or the wild, though, he will have to make major adjustments to adapt to life in a home.

Free ranging dogs may have never lived indoors. Some may have been born in a home and then dumped or abandoned. Others are born on the streets or in the surrounding countryside. Some are born on property but are kept outside as 'chain dogs'. It's important to take the dog's perspective and consider the impact of capture and homing and how this can affect behaviour.

Neck sensitivity

Capture is a traumatic and often painful process, especially when a catch pole is used. Because of this, many street dogs are very sensitive about being touched around the neck and head area. **Your dog may become very anxious about wearing a collar and lead; even more so if the lead is attached to the collar.**

It's kinder and more comfortable for your dog if you use a harness, and a harness such as Perfect Fit can have an extra D ring fitted at the front as well as having the D ring, as usual, on the back. **This avoids the risk of any pressure on the neck area, and your dog can sleep in the harness initially so that you don't have to worry him by taking it off and putting it back on periodically.**

Further Reading: [A Buyers Guide to Dog Harnesses](#)

Arrival

A new environment is likely to be very scary for your dog. Bear in mind that he may have been in a cage in a moving van for several days, in a cramped space surrounded by other unfamiliar dogs. Dogs are often handed over at specified venues, usually a car park or service station, either to a UK rescue representative or directly to the fosterer or adopter. **Sadly, it's common for dogs to escape at this time, because they're in shock, afraid, and desperate,** and have no idea that the strangers who have arrived for them only have the best of intentions. Taking along a well-fitting harness and double lead is the most effective way to ensure that your dog can be safely moved into your vehicle.

Once you arrive home, **take extra precautions to ensure your dog cannot escape when you open the car door.** Have someone with you who can hold the lead (or the dog) throughout the journey, and who can ensure that your dog doesn't bolt as soon as the door cracks open a little. **Once your dog is indoors, remind the rest of the household to be very careful when entering and leaving your home. Keep accessible windows closed. If necessary, put the dog in a separate room when the doorbell rings, to ensure he stays safely inside. Keep a check on outdoor boundaries; make sure the boundary fencing is adequate to contain a potential escape artist, and check that gates are kept securely bolted.**

Introduction to Resident Dogs

Many street dogs are more comfortable around other dogs, especially in the early days, and a calm, confident resident dog can boost a new dog's confidence and help him settle in more easily.

If you already have a dog, or dogs, **it's best to introduce them to your new family member in a neutral place outside, to avoid any risk of territorial behaviour.** You'll need to have a person for each dog, and you can go for a short walk if your new dog is coping with being on lead.

It can help to take it in turns for the dogs to follow each other, as this gives them the opportunity to catch whiffs of the other dog's scent. Have the dogs on the outside and humans on the inside, so that they feel safer. Watch for body language that shows any of the dogs are stressed: low body, low or tucked tail, avoidance behaviours, tucked back ears, lunging, barking, showing the whites of the eyes, raised hackles, and flattening to the ground are just some of the things to look for. If the dogs seem to be relaxed you can allow them to move closer if they choose to, but don't force them to interact.

The three second rule is very useful for all dog introductions. If they show signs of wanting to greet each other, allow them to move close enough to sniff for three seconds and then gently move them apart. Repeat this for as long as you feel is necessary.

Once indoors, having them in separate rooms or areas with a safety gate between them can help each dog adjust to the other's presence without feeling threatened, and allows them to see and hear each other and get accustomed to their new companions while reducing stress.

Adjusting to the Challenges of Domestic Life

The restrictions of four walls, closed doors, enclosed gardens, collars and leads, set mealtimes, human rules and regulations, and sights, smells and sounds that we take for granted are all likely to be extremely frightening to your new dog, who will most likely have never experienced anything like it. Imagine you've been transported to a country where you don't understand the language and customs, no-one speaks your language, and you're then left to figure everything out on your own. That's just a tiny fraction of what your street dog will be experiencing.

His previous life will most likely have been spent roaming the streets, scavenging, resting, hanging out with dog friends, and being in control of where he goes and what he does. That sense of control is lost when he is confined indoors or to a garden, and he suddenly finds himself dependent on you for absolutely everything. You choose when he eats, where he rests, who he interacts with – and there is no escape route if he feels scared, threatened or under pressure.

Add to this the confusion of people coming and going, conversations in close proximity, doors opening and closing, the sounds of the television, music, washing machine, the whirring of the fridge, lights being turned on and off, electricity buzzing through wires in the walls, humans and traffic passing by the windows and garden, plus strange smells that he will not have been exposed to, such as detergents.

Understanding what a culture shock your dog is experiencing will enable you to find ways in which to reduce the pressure and help him learn to feel safe.

Settling in

The most important thing you can do is to take steps to reduce the stress your dog is experiencing. A comfy dog bed that's tucked away in a quiet area provides a safe retreat and resting place. He'll be exhausted after his long journey, so make sure he has plenty of water close by, offer him a light meal, and leave him to rest. If he's nervous of a metal food bowl at first, you could use a [non-metal eco bowl](#), or even scatter his food close by so that he can forage for it – after all, this may be how he is accustomed to getting his meals.

Your family and friends may be keen to visit and meet him, but it's best to make your home a visitor free zone for at least a week (preferably two weeks) to give your dog some time to become familiar with your home and immediate family.

It's tempting to want to make a fuss of a new dog, to show affection and help him or her feel loved. However, this can be intimidating for many street dogs, so be guided by your dog. Speak softly, use his name when you call him and when food is involved, so that he quickly learns his new name and begins to associate it with good things happening. Move slowly. Glance sideways at him instead of looking directly at him, so that he understands your intentions are friendly. Keep your voice soft. Touch him gently on the chest or flanks if he approaches you, but **ask everyone in the home not to approach him, and to only stroke him if he asks for that by moving close and showing inviting body language such as nudging or leaning in, soft eyes, an open mouth with a lolling tongue, a wiggly body and tail.**

Toilet training is no harder with a street dog than with a home-bred dog. Your dog just needs to learn the difference between indoors and outdoors, and to be richly rewarded every time he 'goes' outside. **To teach good toilet habits it's important that you go outside with your dog, and ensure you have a pocketful of treats at all times so that you can reward him by praising him softly and dropping a treat on the ground right in front of him every time he eliminates.**

Exercise

Walks aren't essential during the first few weeks. In fact, keeping your dog at home gives him chance to become used to his new environment without additional stress being placed on him.

Sindhoor Pangal's studies on "[The Lives of Streeties](#)" in India reveals that, in fact, they take far less exercise than our home-bred dogs. Street dogs spend much of their time napping, observing the world going by, chilling out with dog friends, playing, and finding food.

Your dog may not be used to wearing a collar, harness and lead, and may find it overwhelming to be taken out for walks during the early weeks. You won't want to add to his stress, so short practices in loose lead walking in the garden each day (with lots of smelly treats on hand to teach him that good things come his way when he walks by your side) will get him used to the strange sensations of being attached to you. It won't take long for him to learn that this is fun, and you can then start with very short walks (just a few yards) and increase the time spent outside your garden according to how comfortable he seems. If he's anxious please bring him straight home, so that he understands that you're his champion and protector. You can try again the next day – there's no need to rush.

The relationship that develops between a previously homeless dog and his new guardian can be an extraordinary gift on both sides. Being sensitive to your dog's feeling and needs, and being patient and gentle while you teach him that indoor life can be good, are the keys to building a lasting loving relationship.

About the Author



Lisa Tenzin-Dolma is an ABTC Accredited Animal Behaviourist, INTODogs Certified Canine Behaviourist and author. She is the principal of [The International School for Canine Psychology & Behaviour](#), co-chair of [The Association of INTODogs](#), which she represents for [The Animal Behaviour & Training Council](#), and is founder of [The Dog Welfare Alliance](#).




Lisa has had 33 books published, including "[Charlie, the Dog Who Came in from the Wild](#)," a book about how she taught a Romanian feral dog to enjoy domestic life.



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