

Secondhand Dogs:

Planning Ahead when Adopting the Unwanted

By Kari Bastyr, M.S., CDBC

In the past several years, I've been able to work with many dogs who have been adopted from a shelter or breed rescue. I affectionately call them "Secondhand Dogs." There are many different reasons why people wish to adopt a Secondhand Dog; some want to give back to their community and others simply want to give an unwanted dog a safe, loving forever home.

While these dogs are very special in their individual way, many of them come with unique behavioral issues that often are caused by their first owner. Adopting a Secondhand Dog can be very rewarding, but it can also be a process that involves unique challenges and frustrations as the dog settles in and his true personality comes out.

For instance, it is possible that a dog who gets along wonderfully with dogs in his foster home or shelter will be reactive or aggressive towards other dogs in its new home or neighborhood. It is possible that a dog who does not exhibit separation anxiety in his foster home could be anxious and destructive in his new home. It is possible that a friendly dog can become protective and fearful once he becomes comfortable. Dog behavior can be very context-specific and some environments can be quite different to a dog and will cause him to behave differently than in the past. Certain situations could even remind a dog of his first home, where he was neglected and/or abused and cause him to become defensively aggressive or bite out of fear.

The good news is that most Secondhand Dogs do very well in their new forever home. There may be surprises along the way, but most issues can easily be worked

through. "Since becoming involved in rescue in 2004, I've personally adopted five Secondhand Great Danes — four seniors and one with special needs," says Bree Dew, COO of Big Dogs Huge Paws, Inc., a giant breed rescue in Denver. "Each came with their own quirks as a result of the neglect, abuse or lack of socialization they suffered at the hands of their previous owners, but nothing could outweigh the joy they've brought to my life. At one time or another, they all had been considered 'throw away dogs' by someone in their past, yet I consider them my most precious family members."

I recommend several things to do before and after you adopt your Secondhand Dog, not only to help make things easier, but to give your new dog the best chance possible for his future.

1). **Do Your Homework.** Just as if you were picking out a puppy, research different dog breeds to find out which one will best fit into your lifestyle. Please keep in mind that most dogs from shelters will be a combination of breeds. For example, if a dog is a Border Collie/Labrador, you will have a very high energy, athletic and intelligent dog... This mix of dog would not do well with someone who is a couch potato. If the dog is a blue heeler (Australian Cattle Dog) or Australian Shepherd mix, it is possible she will 'herd' with her mouth which some people may find troublesome and the dog may not do well with young children. If the dog is a Schnauzer or Yorkie mix, he may bark all the time. If the dog is a St. Bernard or Mastiff mix, she could grow very large and your dog food expenses will grow exponentially with her!



Kari Bastyr with Jasper

Photo by Claire Bow

2). **Ask Questions.** When adopting from a breed rescue or shelter, always ask a lot of questions about breed, temperament, known history, health, etc. Be wary of rescues or shelters who try to convince you to adopt a certain dog. Be sure the Secondhand Dog you are adopting is right for you.

3). **Set Up For Success.** Please do not expect your newly adopted dog to be welcoming and happy with eight people over for a dinner party the day of your adoption. Please do not expect your dog to know where to eliminate, or what not to chew on. Consider confining your dog for the first couple weeks until you get to know him. If you keep your expectations low, you will inevitably be setting your Secondhand Dog up to succeed much more than if you expect too much. Your Secondhand Dog will need training just as if she were a puppy — expecting her to 'behave' just because you want her to is not a fair expectation. Bree says, "When we are counseling our prospective families prior to adoption, we set the expectation that bringing a new dog into your home isn't always a smooth transition and everyone needs to be cognizant of the adjustment period,

which affects not only the new dog, but the resident animals and all of the family members. It is critical that a new family be realistic and if things are not going well it is imperative to reach out to the experts, like an animal behaviorist, for direction." Also, it is important that you don't compare your new Golden Retriever to your old Golden Retriever. Every dog is different and comparisons will only hurt your relationship.

4). **Ease the Transition.** Please do not bring your dog to the pet store or dog park immediately after your adoption. If you are planning on adopting a dog, be prepared with a collar, leash, bed, and meat-based dry food ahead of time. If possible, take a day or two off from your job to spend with her to ease the transition.

5). **Give your Dog a Job!** Even if you adopt a senior dog, he will still need something to do while you're gone;

keep in mind that mental exercise will often tire your dog out more than physical exercise. I always suggest using a rubber Kong toy as a food bowl and freeze your dog's kibble with some wet dog food and water for every meal. Also, other problem-solving toys (not squeaky toys or balls) can keep your dog busy for hours.

6). **Refrain from Punishment.** As with any dog, but especially with Secondhand Dogs, do not physically punish their behavioral infractions. It is important to give your dog verbal and visual cues, but don't force them to do anything. If they are afraid, don't attempt to be 'dominant.' Give them space and time to warm up to you. If your dog submissively urinates when you pet her, she is either scared or excited and punishment will make it worse. If your dog growls at you, turn your back and take a moment to let him relax and then try to redirect him without force. Use

a happy voice and small pieces of hot dogs or cheese to lure him where you want him to go — do not force him! If you punish growling (a very appropriate dog warning), next time he may skip the growl and go directly to snapping and/or biting. Remember, it is likely that he was punished and forced in his former home and this will inevitably damage the bond you are trying to build.

I encourage you to consider a Secondhand Dog the next time you are looking to add a pet to your home. Without a doubt, when you open your home to a Secondhand Dog, you are saving a life. There may be challenges along the way, but in return you will enjoy many years of unconditional love and joy.

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