



Settling In: Transitioning from Shelter to Home

Transitioning home from a shelter environment can be challenging for many dogs. *The shelter experience is highly stressful for any dog*, and studies show that high levels of stress hormones take time to work their way out of a dog's body. It's often our first impulse to give our new dog as much exercise as possible, or to take them right away on stimulating adventures such as to pet stores, dog parks, beaches, or on long hikes. However, *this can be overstimulating and ultimately stressful for them when they first come home*. Making a plan to *help them decompress* when they first get home can ease transition, build your bond, and prevent unwanted behaviors.

- **Get ready for the first 48.** The first two days home are often the most challenging! Your new friend has no idea what is happening, what to expect, or what is expected from them. They may have potty accidents, get into household items, or show peaks of energy at unexpected times, such as in the middle of the night. This can feel tiring or discouraging. However, this is typically a normal part of the transition home.
- **Be prepared to supervise your new dog.** As long as it's safe to do so, plan for them to be in the same room as you early on in order to observe their needs and body cues. Are they whining or circling the room, signaling they might need to potty? Are they looking for an item to chew on? Are they interested in the trash can? By getting to know their signals, you can better provide them with alternate appropriate outlets for their behaviors and prevent unwanted behaviors.
- **Routine, routine, routine!** This is one of the best ways to ease transition. Wake up, feed, potty, walk, and go to bed at similar times each day. Helping your dog learn what to expect can help them relax into their new rhythm.
- **Cancel introductions, adventures, and expectations.** For the *first two weeks*, limit introductions with new people, new dogs, and even resident animals. Keep walks short, positive (bring treats!), predictable, and in the immediate neighborhood initially, unless driving somewhere quieter nearby might set your dog up for success. Allow your dog to take time to sniff. Remain present/engaged with your pup as you get to know their needs. Refrain from long hikes, dog parks, areas with high foot traffic, or shopping trips. If you have a yard, feel free to replace some leashed walks with yard time.
- **Dog-proof your home.** Dogs are natural foragers, and your new dog is adjusting to new expectations while recovering from a stressful experience. Set your dog up for success by making sure cords, food items, dirty clothes, and shoes are inaccessible *before you bring your new friend home*. Make sure to also provide ample appropriate outlets for their normal foraging instincts to help them make the right choices —see below!

- **Follow their nose!** *Sniffing is a calming activity for dogs.* It creates a physically relaxing effect on their nervous system. Encouraging your dog to sniff is a great way to facilitate decompression.
 - **Sniffy strolls**—Take your dog to a quiet area with the sole purpose of letting them sniff. Let them choose where to go. It doesn't matter if it's 10min in the same spot, your only goal is to let them sniff.
 - **Foraging games**—Toss some kibble into grass, leaves, into a bunched up blanket indoors, or purchase a "snuffle mat" to encourage your dog to sniff them out. You can even feed your dog their meal this way!
 - For more ideas, see our *Doggie Decompression* handout!
- **Practice relaxation skills.** There are plenty of simple training exercises that can help your dog actively practice relaxation in a non-stressful way. We're not forcing our dogs to keep a down-stay regardless of how they're feeling; these exercises are built to target a dog's central nervous system to help them practice bringing down their excitement levels themselves. Our *Mat Meditation* handout can get you started, or you can work with a certified trainer!
- **Puzzle toys that encourage settling.** Dogs will naturally lie down to chew on objects like bones and chew toys, and there are many ways to encourage this process. Give your dog a toy that they have to lick or chew to get food out of, such as a Kong stuffed with frozen wet food, or smeared with peanut butter. For a comprehensive list of enrichment, see our *Constructive Canine Enrichment* handout.
- **Begin crate training and potty training.** Both our *Crate Training* and *Potty Training* handouts in our free online behavior library can get you started!

Pro Tip: Does your dog stress “up,” or stress “down?”

Dogs cope with stress differently. Some pant, bark, jump, mouth, steal objects, or run zoomies. We call this heightened excitement stressing “up.” Some dogs cope in the opposite direction—they become subdued, quiet, and may sleep a lot. We call this stressing “down.” Often, these behaviors are mislabeled calm, or “chilled out.” It can be a surprise when another personality seems to surface once they become more comfortable after transitioning home.

While you might not see the need to plan ahead as many of the above steps suggest, know that your dog's behavior can change once they get more comfortable. It's always good to have tools on hand before you need them!