

# Adopting a Shelter/Rescue Dog

By Kim Kincaid

Adopting a shelter or rescue dog can be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life. It can also be a disaster. Studies done by the ASPCA show that up to 30% of dogs that are adopted are returned within three weeks of the adoption. What happened?

If you are considering adopting or have adopted a “rescue” dog you most likely have a gentle heart, a need to help this dog and in regard to the presumed lack of human love and proper companionship to “make it right”. This is a very admiral personality. However, it can be this very loving and helpful personality that may also sabotage a human/adopted dog relationship.

It is easy and even normal to want to shower the adopted pet with unconditional love and praise in an attempt to make up for what one may feel the dog has missed out on. Much attention and petting are heaped on the dog the first week or so. Many rescue dogs will act submissively the first few days- they will exhibit low energy, no barking or charging at a door, rolling over to show their belly, ducking their head and hanging ‘low’. Oftentimes adopted dogs will initially shy away from the naturally strong presence of men, perceiving them to be the pack leader.

This submissive behavior in the dog’s culture is used to communicate, “I am not a threat”. The low energy is considered non-threatening in dog language. This is the dog’s inherent way of trying to assimilate into a new pack and determining just where in the new family hierarchy it fits.

This normal behavior in a new or stressful situation is many times misunderstood by the new owner to be signs of former abuse, and because the dog may show this behavior more naturally in the presence of a man, it may be assumed the dog was mistreated by a man. This is a sure fire way for the dog to be treated as though made of fine crystal.

For the first few days the newly adopted dog accepts all this unsolicited attention. It does not take long for the dog to understand that as he is receiving all the attention he is near or at the top of the hierarchy. Every petting is a salute. Every verbal praise and kind tone is an invitation to be in charge.

In dog culture the dog that gets the lion’s share of attention from the rest of its family is the dog in charge. The dog that is in charge will lead the way-not maliciously or with intent to be a dictator, but with a firm presence and the understanding that the leader may do as he pleases.

Soon that sweet dog at the shelter that was looking at you so desperately for love and a home is now a bossy little demanding general. He may begin to paw your legs and arms in a demand for more praise. He may begin to growl if something displeases him. He may begin to bark and ignore attempts to hush him. He will probably begin jumping up on you, your family and guests.

The new owners become frustrated and begin to think that perhaps the shelter slipped them a lemon. This maddening relationship is not what you had intended or signed up for.

The dog is returned, either with great sadness, disappointment and a sense of failure or with a sense of relief and a vow to never adopt a shelter dog again.

To start the new relationship off correctly you will want to utilize the dog’s instinctive understanding of his culture to insure things don’t get out of line. Follow these rules closely the first three weeks. This will ingrain in your dog his boundaries and where he fits in your family.

## ALL-IMPORTANT FIRST THREE WEEK RULES:

Don’t allow the new dog on your furniture and most importantly on you and your family’s beds. Only the pack leader is allowed these cushy areas. This is you and your family.

Don't shower your new pet with un-earned praise and attention. In this manner it is easy for the dog to think he is the leader. Make him sit first- this puts you in a leadership position and reassures the dog you are a good leader. Do not allow him to stand while receiving the praise; release him after the petting with a cheery "OK".

Make your dog wait or sit before you put his food bowl down. Only the leader in the dog culture gets to eat un-invited and first, and doesn't necessarily have to work for his food. Do not allow your dog in the same room you are in when you eat. Do not feed your dog from the table or from your plate.

Do not allow your dog to bolt out of a door to the outside. This also includes the car door and the door to a fenced area. Teach your dog to wait for permission just as you do a toddler. Only the leader in the pack goes first and without permission.

Do use a crate when you are not at home. This helps define boundaries and sets your dog up for success. Uncrated dogs can and will exhibit stress behaviors by chewing, barking and soiling the floors. It is best to crate your new dog in his crate for 10-15 minutes upon arrival at his new home. Boundaries are defined right away and this down time allows your new dog to de-compress and study his new surroundings from a safe vantage point.

Do not allow your dog to pull you while on leash. The dog that insists on pulling the leash tight is the leader. Allowing a tight leash confuses the dog about necessary boundaries and human rules.

Do your best to not feel sorry for your new dog, instead feel happy for your new family member and he will feel your joy!