

New Dog Adoption Guide: First Weeks at Home

Bringing a rescue dog into a home is a big transition. Even confident-looking dogs are often still in a state of adjustment underneath. The aim in the first weeks is not to test the dog, but to help them feel safe enough that stable behaviour can naturally emerge.

1. Understanding the Transition (The 3-3-3 Framework)

Most rescue dogs move through predictable phases:

First 3 days:

- Overwhelmed or shut down
- May not eat properly or may overeat
- Very little “true personality” visible yet

First 3 weeks:

- Starts to explore routines
- May show new behaviours (testing boundaries, fear, excitement, reactivity)
- Can appear “better” or suddenly “worse” — both are normal

First 3 months:

- Gradual settling into real baseline behaviour
- Trust and routine become established
- True temperament becomes clearer

Important: Early calm behaviour is often relief or shutdown, not full adjustment.

2. The Goal: Decompression, Not Performance

In the beginning, the dog does not need:

- Training pressure
- Social testing
- Exposure to busy environments

The dog does need:

- Predictable routine
- Rest and sleep
- Low-pressure environments
- Time to observe and adjust

Think of it as recovery from change, not correction of behaviour.

3. The Home Environment

A safe setup helps prevent many problems before they start:

- A quiet resting space the dog can retreat to freely
- Consistent daily routine (walks, feeding, rest)
- Limited visitors in the first phase
- No constant handling or over-fussing

The dog should always be able to choose distance and rest without pressure.

4. Early Walks and Outside World Exposure

- Keep walks calm and predictable
- Avoid busy streets at first if the dog is unsure
- Allow sniffing and observation time
- Do not force interaction with people or dogs

The aim is confidence through choice, not exposure for its own sake.

5. Dog-to-Dog Interactions

Early introductions should be:

- Calm
- Controlled
- Preferably parallel walking in neutral spaces
- Short and structured

Avoid:

- Free indoor interaction early on
- Unsupervised time with other dogs
- Forced greetings

Dogs need time to understand boundaries in a new environment before sharing space safely.

6. Common Misinterpretations

It is very common for adopters to assume:

- “The dog is fine now” after a few calm days
- “The dog has suddenly changed” when stress behaviours appear later
- “The dog is being difficult” when actually overwhelmed or unsure

In reality, behaviour often reflects **stress levels and adjustment stage**, not personality change.

7. The Most Important Shift in Thinking

Instead of asking:

“How do I train this behaviour out?”

Ask:

“What is making this feel unsafe or overwhelming for the dog right now?”

When a dog feels safe, calm and confidence tend to develop naturally.

8. Final Message

A rescue dog is not arriving with a finished personality in a new home — they are arriving mid-transition.

The first weeks are about stability, not testing.

With patience, routine, and low pressure, most dogs begin to relax and show their true behaviour over time.

9. Normal Adjustment Behaviours (What Can Look Worrying but is Often Normal)

Many adopters worry that certain behaviours mean something is going wrong. In most cases, these are normal parts of adjustment as the dog learns a new environment, routine, and relationships.

Very Common (and often misunderstood) behaviours:

- Sleeping much more than expected or appearing "lazy" or withdrawn
- Following the owner everywhere ("shadowing") and seeming clingy
- Not responding to name or commands at first, even if previously trained
- Eating very little, eating too much, or changing appetite daily
- Being very quiet, "shut down", or emotionally flat in the first days
- Sudden bursts of energy, zooming, or restlessness at odd times
- Startling easily at everyday sounds (doors, bins, voices, traffic)
- Staring at people or objects without obvious reason
- Hesitating to enter rooms, go through doors, or walk on certain surfaces
- Suddenly refusing walks or wanting to turn back quickly
- Becoming very attached to one person in the household
- Seeking hiding places (under tables, corners, behind furniture)
- Carrying toys or objects around constantly (self-soothing behaviour)
- Mild avoidance of touch, then gradually seeking it later

Social and Emotional Adjustment Signs:

- Appearing confident in one situation but fearful in another
- Interacting well outside but struggling indoors (or the opposite)
- Testing routines (not necessarily disobedience, but uncertainty)
- Brief reactions to dogs or people followed by quick recovery
- Needing time before they will relax in new spaces

Important to remember:

These behaviours often appear, change, and disappear as the dog begins to feel safe. It is very common for a dog to seem "fine" for a few days and then suddenly show more fear, guarding, or uncertainty once the initial shock wears off.

This does not mean the dog is getting worse. It usually means the dog is starting to feel safe enough to show more honest behaviour.

10. What NOT to Do in the First Week

The first week is about stability and safety, not testing or training. Many common problems come from doing too much too soon, even with good intentions.

Avoid in the early days:

- Introducing too many new people, dogs, or environments at once
- Expecting obedience or training to be consistent from day one
- Allowing free, unsupervised interaction with other dogs in the home
- Over-handling, constant touching, or forcing affection
- Taking the dog into busy, noisy, or highly stimulating places too early
- Assuming "good behaviour" means the dog is fully settled
- Changing routines daily (walk times, feeding times, sleeping areas)
- Ignoring signs of overwhelm because the dog "looks fine"

Why this matters:

Rescue dogs are still learning what is safe. Too much stimulation early on can increase confusion, insecurity, or over-arousal. This can lead to behaviours that seem sudden or unexpected later on.

The goal in the first week is simple: calm repetition, predictable routine, and giving the dog time to decompress without pressure.
