

PETS

Adopting a Dog for the First Time

Adopting a dog is beautiful, exciting, and beneficial to your health, but also comes with challenges. With the right preparation, you can overcome any anxiety and ensure the best possible start for you and your new companion.

By [Lawrence Robinson](#)

Last updated or reviewed on May 16, 2023

Choosing a dog to adopt

If you are a first-time dog owner, suddenly having to take care of another little being can feel overwhelming. However, the [many benefits](#) of adopting a dog usually far outweigh the negatives of this new responsibility. The first few weeks can be difficult for both you and your dog, but with some preparation and the right attitude, you can overcome any initial anxiety, and settle in to a rich, rewarding life together.

Have realistic expectations. If you are getting ready to adopt a dog, be prepared to end up with a canine companion that doesn't look exactly how you imagined. There are so many dogs that need help, it would be sad not to give at least a chance to those that don't fit a specific description or breed. Although genetics have some influence on a dog's character, a recent study shows that breed does not predict the behavior of a dog. A dog's personality and behavior are also shaped by life experiences, including how well you care for them.

[\[Read: Choosing the Right Dog\]](#)

Know your limits. Be honest with yourself about what you can offer your new canine companion and choose a dog that fits your lifestyle. Energetic or couch potato? How much time are you willing to put into grooming the dog? Are you willing to raise a puppy? Choosing a dog whose needs are compatible with your habits will make both of you happy.

Age is just a number. It is a common myth that adult dogs are untrainable. On the contrary, [adopting an older dog](#) can be a wonderful experience. They are often much calmer than puppies and can be very well-behaved. Of course, adopting an adult dog comes with its own challenges, but it's an option worth considering.

Take time to get to know the dog in person. In the end, nothing is as important as in-person impressions. Sometimes, you'll see a dog and immediately know it is meant to be. And even if things are not as clear, it's a good idea to spend some time with a dog you are planning to adopt and get to know each other better.

Preparing your home for a canine companion

You've found your canine companion and adoption day is coming close. Taking some time to make sure your home is ready for a new inhabitant is important.

Think about dog-friendly spaces in your home. Where is your furry friend going to sleep? Are they going to be allowed free range of your home, or are some areas off-limits, like your bedroom, for example? Decide what the rules are going to be before you need to enforce them—and that everyone in your household agrees.

Make sure any outdoor spaces are secure. No matter if you have a backyard, a large plot of land, or a balcony, if there are outdoor spaces your dog is going to be allowed in, make sure they are properly fenced and escape-proof. Chasing a runaway dog is no fun. If that's not an option, be ready to supervise your dog at all times.

Make sure dangerous items are out of reach. Food, medications, cleaning products, anything toxic, sharp, or fragile should all be out of the reach of your dog. If you are bringing home a young puppy, this advice is even more important. Puppies get into everything, so you'll also want to make sure anything chewable is out of reach—including electric cables and shoes.

Things you will need on the first day

Get the basic supplies and gear ahead of time. At the very minimum, your dog should have a bed to sleep on, food and water bowls, and enough food to get you through the first couple of days. If you plan to use a crate, it's a good time to get that too.

Regarding food, it's always a good idea to get the same kind the dog has already been eating, so they have at least something familiar during the adjustment period. Later, you can gradually switch to a different type or brand of food if you wish.

Other equipment you'll need. A collar with an ID tag is a good idea from day one, and you'll definitely need a leash. Collars are good because dogs can keep them on most of the time, but harnesses are a healthier option for walking and leash training, so you might want to get that too.

Finally, you might also want to consider getting some extra comfort items. Having a couple of tasty treats around to make your new canine companion feel more relaxed is always a good idea, as well as a few toys to keep them entertained. Don't go too crazy on those, though, because you still don't know what kind of toys your new dog will like.

Bringing the dog home

The day you bring your dog home for the first time is a big day for everyone involved. In order for everything to go well, it's important to be mindful of the introductions.

First of all, introduce the dog to the space they are going to be living in. Most dogs will be curious when they enter a new space, and will want to sniff and look around. Be calm and let the dog explore. With very energetic dogs, the first tour can be done on a leash. If you have other pets in the home, it might be a good idea to keep them away at first. Above all, don't force anything and make sure the dog has space to rest.

If you have other pets in your home, it's important to take things slowly. If you already have a dog in your home, it's a well-established practice to let the dogs meet each other somewhere outside, on neutral territory. It's

helpful to have somebody else with you and both dogs on a leash for a start. Don't force anything and give the dogs space. Once they get to know each other, you can take them home together.

But be careful about introducing your new pet to people—especially young children. The best strategy, in this case, is for the humans to remain completely calm and let the dog come closer, sniff, and investigate. If the dog is fearful or anxious, give them time, and don't try to jump into a cuddling session. If the dog is very playful, using a leash during the first meeting is always a good idea.

That being said, some dogs are very social and will fit right in. Others will need a bit of time and work, but just remember to stay patient and take things slowly. If you're able to, it can be a good idea to take a few days off work to stay with your new furry friend and help them adjust.

Settling in

The first couple of weeks with your new dog will be an adjustment period—for the dog, for you, and for anyone else who lives in the house. It will take time to settle in, so it's important to be patient and understanding.

Make the process as easy as possible for your dog. Make sure the dog has a space where they can relax and process their new living circumstances. A bed or a crate with lots of blankets is a great way to make them feel safe and secure.

It might take a while for everything to fall into place. After all, the dog does not yet know this is their new forever home. The first night might be especially difficult. Many dogs spend the first night in a new home whining or crying, but just stay strong and have patience. Your dog will settle down eventually.

Give the dog time to decompress. During the first few days, try to keep the environment calm. Don't introduce the dog to too many new things and don't try to force activities. Take this time to observe the dog and their body language—you'll quickly learn to understand each other better.

Establish a daily routine as soon as possible. Dogs love routine and predictability. Things like [going for a walk](#) at the same time each day and having meals at set times will help the dog feel more secure and ease any anxiety.

As you start spending more time with your dog, you will slowly build a bond of trust. Activities like walks and playing games will help with that, but more than anything, it's just about being by each other's side.

Coping with any behavioral problems

The number one mistake new pet parents make is expecting the animal to fit into the new home immediately. As explained above, adaptation takes time, and dogs may exhibit all sorts of inappropriate behaviors rooted in anxiety during the first few weeks. Don't let that scare you and just keep treating the dog with love and patience. Just think about how you would feel if you somehow suddenly moved to an entirely new home and a new family. You'd surely need time to adjust.

However, not all challenges can be solved by simply letting the dog adapt. Some adopted dogs are rescues who have been through a lot, and it is fairly common for them to come with a range of behavioral problems. These are often rooted in fear, anxiety, and/or improper socialization during the critical early age. The most common problems include destructive behaviors, aggression, resource guarding, and separation anxiety.

There are specific strategies you can learn about to deal with each of these problems, but there are some basic principles that can help you:

Ensure the dog has a safe space to retreat to. If a dog is dealing with feelings of fear, anxiety, or stress, a safe and quiet corner (or a crate) can help them feel more secure. Make sure this space is always available, and then work with the dog so he understands the space is his own.

Make sure the dog gets enough exercise. This can help with virtually any behavioral problem. Dogs that are bored can exhibit all sorts of problematic behaviors. Many dogs need lots of both physical and mental stimulation every day. A tired dog is a happy dog. If you don't have time to exercise your dog outside to the degree they need, consider hiring a dog walker or provide some interactive toys, like snuffle mats and puzzles, to keep your furry friend entertained. Some dogs are real couch potatoes, though, so don't feel the need to force exercise on your dog if they seem to be doing fine.

For separation anxiety, keep goodbyes low-key. If your dog whines, destroys things, or generally acts out when you are away, it's probably suffering from separation anxiety. The basic trick for dealing with this is to not make a big deal when leaving. No goodbye cuddles, no talking to the dog. Simply leave. This way, the dog will understand that you leaving isn't a big deal.

Practice positive reinforcement. It might be hard at times, but do your best not to be angry at your dog when they do something wrong. Punishment and yelling may just reinforce bad behaviors caused by fear. Instead, use lots of treats and praise when the dog is doing things right.

The thing to remember is that behavioral problems are rarely unsolvable. If you find yourself feeling like you are hitting a wall and getting frustrated, don't hesitate to ask for help. If you've adopted a dog from a rescue or adoption organization, reach out to them. They know the problems rescue dogs face and might be able to guide you through the process. Don't hesitate to talk to your veterinarian, either. They will be able to give you guidelines or, for the most demanding cases, refer you to a trainer or dog behaviorist.

More Information

References

01. UMass Chan Medical School. "UMass Chan Study Shows Canine Behavior Only Slightly Influenced by Breed," April 28, 2022.
02. The Power of Pets | NIH News in Health. (n.d.). Retrieved April 17, 2023, from
03. RSPCA. "Bringing Your New Dog Home | RSPCA Victoria." Accessed April 17, 2023.