

How to acclimate a foster or adopted Miniature Bull Terrier into a new household

The excitement of getting a new dog, be it a foster or an adoption, is accompanied by the desire or need to have it fit in to your daily routine quickly. You may also want to show it off, cuddle it, hug it, let it play with your own dogs and just assume it will accept it all on that first day. We find ourselves expecting the dog to realize it is in a safe place and to know it will be loved and cared for until it leaves this world. But your new dog will not yet understand. All it knows is that it was just taken from the only situation it knew. Maybe a loving family who could not take it with them, or off the streets where it had to be tough and fight to get food and water or fight just to stay alive. They will not understand that by being with us, they are loved, safe, will have food and a comfy, warm dog bed (couch) to sleep on. In the rare case this may happen, but often it does not and problems can arise.

The reality:

Several weeks down the road, the rescue organization will get a call: "The new dog barked and nipped at me/my kid/my friends," "We had a dog fight," or "The dog is having accidents." Then we hear: "I think we will have to find some place for the dog to go." What do we do to help these dogs succeed in their new homes? Minimal contact/isolation is the answer. Give the new dog time to adjust to you and your family and any pets in the new environment. Depending on the mental and physical condition of the dog, you could need to isolate for a week up to month or even longer. This alone time will give the dog an adjustment period to its new surroundings. Think of it as being a new puppy, just born into this big new world. Puppies cannot see and by using other senses (smell, hearing and even taste) the puppy starts his journey into the new, scary world. New adult dogs come into our homes the same way, being brought into a new and a scary home. By giving the dog alone time, the dog can learn its new world, its new family and begin to relax and grow under the care of its new caregiver(s).

Still uncertain as to why it needs to be so long? You *really* want to show everyone your new pet and you *really* need to keep your daily routine the same! What you forget is that this adult dog is now like that tiny puppy in a new world. The voices speak a new language, the smells are different, they may have never experienced a gentle hand and even leashes may be foreign. Your voice is completely new to them. Something as simple as petting and the loving voice of its new human can be stressful to a new dog. They are thinking: "Who are you? Where did you come from? Where are we? What is expected of me? Will you hit me, too?" Just like a newborn human baby, the new dog should be given this time too. We wouldn't rush out and pass the baby from person to person; we work on setting up a stable and safe environment.

Step back for a minute and think how you would feel. You have no idea if you are ever going back to the only home you have ever known, that you are expected to live with these new people who don't understand your language? And your first day with them, they immediately take you all over the place expecting you to greet everyone happily and feel comfortable with an overabundance of attention all directed at you? It's very likely that you'd feel exhausted, overwhelmed, and uncomfortable. Finding yourself needing to climb into a hole or go back to something familiar. Snapping or yelling at people for dragging you around when all you want to do is rest from your trip and get acclimated to your new surroundings. New dogs are put in the same situation, frequently. Not knowing how to speak the new language, the dog may act out by nipping at people, biting or fighting with the family dog, growling at your hand reaching into its crate and most likely will be corrected harshly before being taught the rules of their new home. They do not know if they are allowed on the furniture in THIS house. After the first punishment for something they were allowed to do in their previous home, they start to become insecure and wonder...Where am I allowed to go? Am I safe? Is that dog over there challenging me? I must protect myself because the humans are not stopping that behavior. Then the fights begin with the new dog just trying to find its place in this new strange world.

For the first week (sometimes even longer depending on the situation), a dog takes in its new environment. They start by figuring out what is going on. Right now all they want to feel is safe. In human terms, this is the dating period. When you first meet a new date, you are on your best behavior, not showing them the real you, right? Would you run up to that person and throw your arms around them at that first meeting? How strange would it be to have them drag you around to all their friends and family to show you off on that first date? Being kissed and hugged by every new person you meet. It's not normal or safe, is it? Would you feel invaded, defensive and begin to get a bit snarky yourself? Yes! Yet this is what we expect of our new dogs, and then we get upset when they aren't relaxed and accepting of all this newness on that first day. This is why they need that first week, a second, or perhaps a month to acclimate to their new world.

Steps to help the rescue feel safe:

1. Crate the dog in a room by itself, if possible. They will know what is going on outside that closed door. After a day or two, I will even place a blanket in that room that has fresh smells of the house (human and dog) on it. If you do not have space to keep them separate then you may crate the dogs in the same room but not where they can see each other eye to eye. Put something between the 2 crates so they can get used to each other's smells and not be able to have a stare down contest.
2. Use a leash to direct the dog to the proper places in the house and outside. This also helps to teach them the new safe zone and know where they are allowed to be when they are with the

new humans. This is also a good time to get them used to a leash if they have never been in contact with one. This keeps you from having to reach in to correct a behavior and possibly getting bitten by a terrified dog.

3. No obedience like training at all, just some fun exercise. Test toys — do they know what they are? Do not leave your yard; let them know this is a safe place to be. There will be time for walks later, especially when you take them out to meet your dogs. No car rides (except to the vet), no other dogs, no pet stores, no walks, nothing but its room and its caregiver.

4. Do not smother the new dog with too much love during this time. Even petting and being out in the home puts pressure on a dog. Allow the dog to get familiar with its new home and allow it to decide when it's time for it to approach you. Forcing attention on it does no good.

5. Play time/exercise. All dogs need to burn off energy. Let them run around your yard sniffing doggie smells. This is one more place for them to get familiar with your own dog's smells. And when the time comes, play with them. Remember to just have fun, let the dog run and explore.

6. Again — no walks off your property yet! Walks are stressful, for there is so much coming at you. Being a new person to this dog, you have no clue how the dog will behave in this new environment. The dog may react to something and by correcting it with the leash we have just created a VERY STRESSFUL moment to the dog in what should have been a bonding moment. Teach your new dog with this isolation period, that YOU are the one to look to, that you are now here for them! Make them aware that they can trust in you and look to you as its new leader!! Then on walks you will see the dog look to you when he sees something like a kid or a dog to see what your reaction is, lessening his mind about having to defend or control the environment, he has YOU, the dog now can relax and enjoy the walk more.

7. In the house I have the dog out only for about 20-40 minutes post exercise/yard times. And ALWAYS on a leash. Then put the dog back in its crate. Let it absorb and think, even if just for a little bit. If the dog goes to his crate on his own, he is telling you, "I need a time out" — allow him this time. By having the dog out for long periods of time, we are forcing the dog to keep accepting all new things. With a short introduction period and then a time out, we are asking him to accept a few things, then go think and absorb, when we get him out later we introduce a few more things and again give them time to think and absorb and understand their new home.

8. No new buddies! Do not introduce your dogs during the isolation period. They can be side by side in the crates if you cannot totally separate (not nose-to-nose, for they can feel defensive). Some dogs will bond instantly with the other dogs if we do not bond first with them, and this can lead to some other issues, as the dog will look to the other dog(s) for guidance and not YOU!

9. Ignore bad behavior. Ignore crying and/or barking. If you run to the dog each time they bark, whine, or cry, you are teaching the dog that doing those things gets your attention. The dog must learn to be secure when you are not there. Use the leash to correct jumping, exploring counters, etc. Praise good behavior gently. This makes naughty behavior not so fun if you ignore it but praise the good!

After this initial isolation period you will begin to see the changes and the dog's true personality start to shine through as they relax and learn to trust you. So, please, if nothing else for your new dog, give it the time to learn you as you are learning who they are! This method works for shy dogs, confident dogs, abuse cases, rowdy dogs, all temperaments! It isn't just the big bully smiles, it's the expression, the way they start to LOOK at you, for guidance, Gain their trust and show them, calmly and fairly, what this new world is like. There is no need to force ourselves as the leaders. Slow easy guidance, patience, showing what we expect of them is all they need and you will start to see the trust in their eyes and body posture. Your reward will be a wonderful new dog to pass on to their new forever family, or perhaps, be a foster failure and keep them as a member of your own family.

Acknowledgement: Adapted from Stacie Sparks, "The Two-Week Shutdown"