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## SETTLING IN & UNDERSTANDING YOUR NEW (FOREIGN) RESCUE DOG

### *Tips for decompression and getting it right from the start*

Whether you have adopted or are fostering a new rescue dog, the first few days, weeks and even months are critical in helping them settle in and building trust. It is essential to get it right from the first day; it is always easier and makes for a smoother transition if we work to prevent behaviour problems rather than letting them get out of hand and then trying to fix them.

Every dog is an individual being with their own thoughts, feelings and emotions. Every dog will have had their own life experiences; whether they were an abandoned pet, a stray brought up on the street or a dog who has spent majority of their life in a public shelter. There are also the lucky ones who are either born in rescue or found at a very young age, so may not have as many negative associations as the others. Each of these dogs will have their own needs for basic care, enrichment, socialisation and [mental & physical] stimulation.

Sadly, some adopters will be unprepared and dogs may find themselves being returned to rescue. When adopting a new dog, we need to have some expectations, especially with nervous and anxious dogs. We should expect that the dog will not be ready to be a 'family pet' straight away, will need plenty of time, patience and space to settle in. We should also be prepared for the fact that some dogs may in fact be 'project dogs', meaning they will need more time and training than the average dog. These are the dogs that may end up being returned if their carers are not prepared enough. These are also the most rewarding dogs; to see a fearful dog wag their tail happily for the first time is experiencing true joy – they are definitely worth it!

This is a guide designed to help you prepare for the arrival of your new rescue dog. Every member of the family (over 16) who will be involved in the dogs care should read through this guide, younger teenagers and children should have the basic information explained and should of course always be supervised when interacting with the dog. Children can and should take an active part in bonding with the dog, however this should be productive and can include fun activities such as trick training and search games.

### **Information on canine behaviour**

How dogs behave, and more importantly how they feel, is affected by many different factors. Genetics, past experiences, trigger stacking\*, medical/health state, resources available to the dog, environment and training history all play a part in the behaviour of an animal. There are even studies which suggest that the environment a pregnant dog is exposed to can have an effect on the behaviour of the unborn pups, as early as gestation!

In order to set the dog up for success, we need to set positive and calm guidance from the start. Being able to understand what our dogs are communicating is the first and probably most important step. Dogs use a mix of visual (body language), vocal, olfactory (smells) and tactile (touch) communicative signals.

Body language is the most important and the clearest to understand. Here is a video which sums up dog body language: it is also important to note the context and the situation in which the behaviour is shown.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0riOwndPzCM&fbclid=IwAR17POe\\_6Eiql36gfDHm\\_UHkBQUVyBz-EeFEtyHc4iccFvQaCVWjy9qljrE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0riOwndPzCM&fbclid=IwAR17POe_6Eiql36gfDHm_UHkBQUVyBz-EeFEtyHc4iccFvQaCVWjy9qljrE)

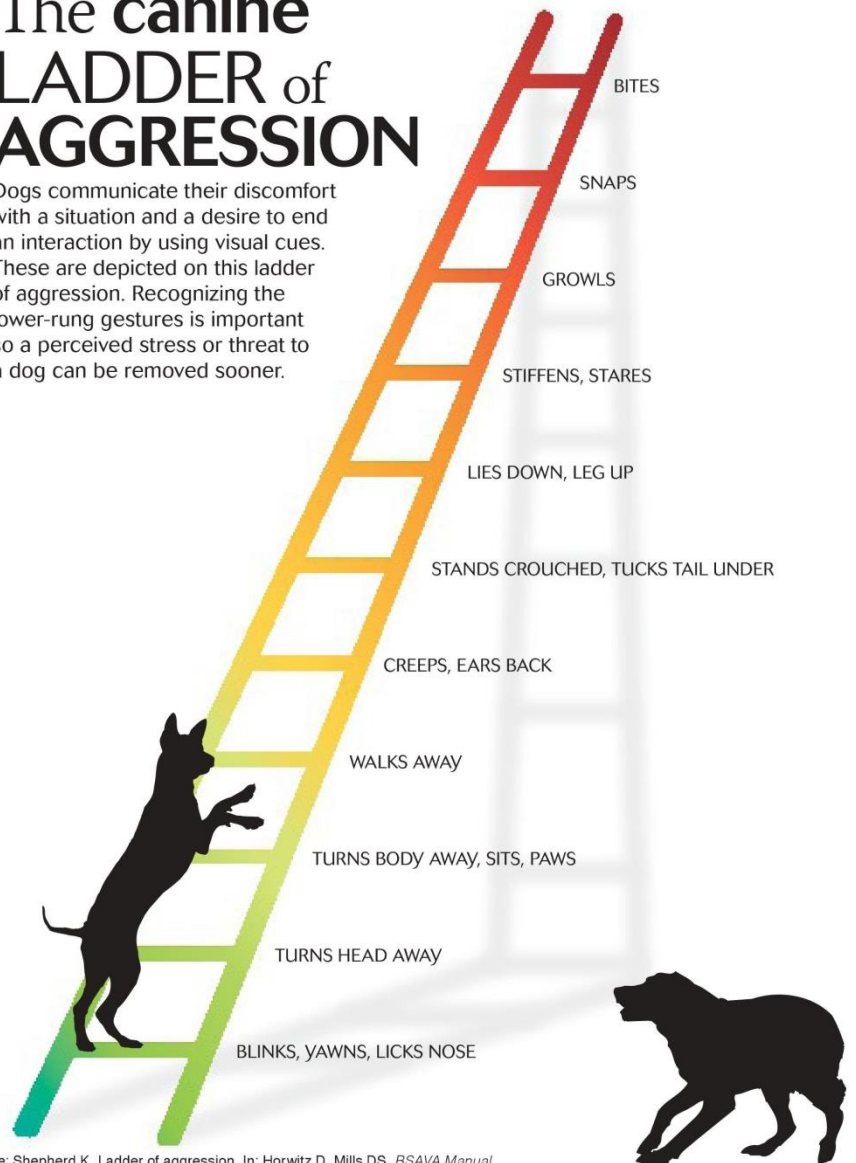
Every single dog has a bite threshold – this is the point at which they will bite. Again this is different for every single dog depending on the reasons listed above. Dogs very rarely bite ‘out of nowhere’ and if they do, it is usually because a) they have a long history of having the first body language signals (requests for space) ignored or b) they have an underlying medical issue such as pain or neurological.

The ‘canine ladder of aggression’ is an incredibly useful visual tool for picking up on the first signs of stress – if the cause of the stress is not removed (e.g. someone touching the dog), they will continue to escalate their behaviour. This is similar to you politely asking someone to move away from you, then ignoring you and you resorting to shouting to get your point across. If you can listen to your dogs ‘whisper’ then you can prevent your dog from having to ‘shout’

\*Trigger stacking is the process of experiencing many smaller, stressful events in a short space of time (be it minutes, hours or even days). The result is that the dog may have an emotional [over]reaction to a stimulus/object/person/animal that they might not usually react to. This video provides a quick explanation behind what happens <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFGIRPAWcSM> Every dog has an emotional limit, and again this is different for every single dog. For some dogs, simply seeing a noisy child, then a dog and then a motorbike all in one walk may cause them to react to the final trigger. For some dogs, it may be that an event in the evening such as fireworks can cause them to react the next day when a stranger comes to the house. It is important to keep these events in mind when considering why a dog might be reacting. It is important to give the dog time to rest; take a few days off walks and focus on mental stimulation and enrichment at home.

## The canine LADDER of AGGRESSION

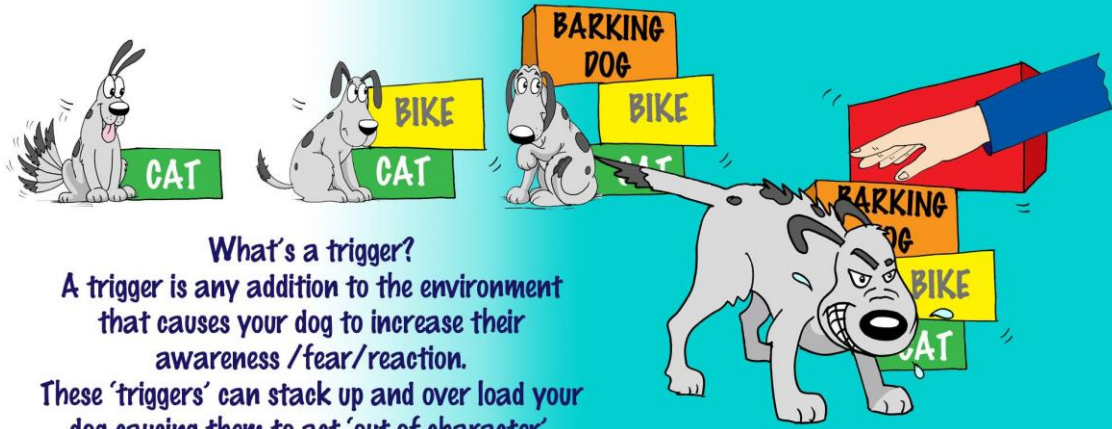
Dogs communicate their discomfort with a situation and a desire to end an interaction by using visual cues. These are depicted on this ladder of aggression. Recognizing the lower-rung gestures is important so a perceived stress or threat to a dog can be removed sooner.



Source: Shepherd K. Ladder of aggression. In: Horwitz D, Mills DS. *BSAVA Manual of Canine and Feline Behavioural Medicine*, 2nd ed. 2009.

# TRIGGER STACKING 101

Why does your dog suddenly react? Probably because they have had enough for the day!



## What's a trigger?

A trigger is any addition to the environment that causes your dog to increase their awareness /fear/reaction.

These 'triggers' can stack up and overload your dog causing them to act 'out of character'.

Dogs function better on structure and routine - they have daily expectations.

Give them time to relax when the unexpected happens.

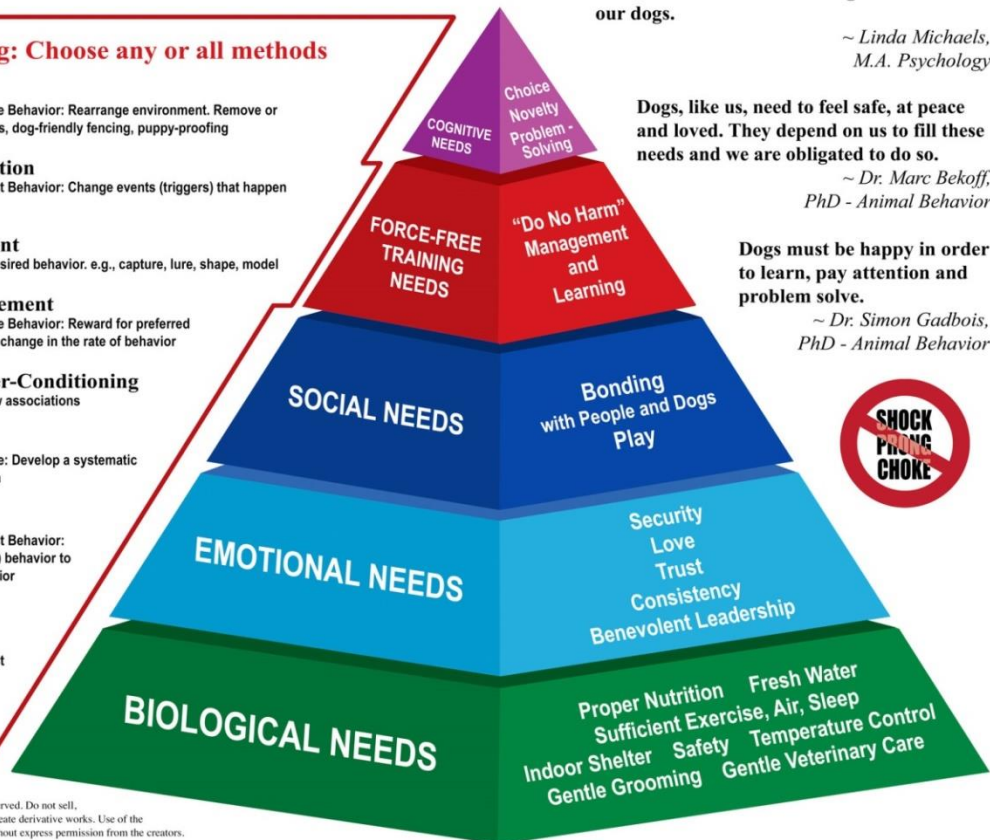
Mightydoggraphics.com (c) 2017

## Hierarchy of Dog Needs®

Standards of Care and Best Force-free Practices

### Force-free Training: Choose any or all methods

- Management**  
 To Increase, Redirect or Decrease Behavior: Rearrange environment. Remove or distance triggers. e.g., baby gates, dog-friendly fencing, puppy-proofing
- Antecedent Modification**  
 To Increase, Decrease or Redirect Behavior: Change events (triggers) that happen before the behavior
- Positive Reinforcement**  
 To Increase Behavior: Reward desired behavior. e.g., capture, lure, shape, model
- Differential Reinforcement**  
 To Redirect, Decrease or Increase Behavior: Reward for preferred incompatible, alternate, other, or change in the rate of behavior
- Classical and Counter-Conditioning**  
 To Change Emotions: Create new associations
- Desensitization**  
 To Decrease Emotional Response: Develop a systematic graduated exposure therapy plan
- Premack Principle**  
 To Increase, Decrease or Redirect Behavior: Use a high probability (preferred) behavior to reinforce a low probability behavior
- Social Learning/Observational**  
 To Increase, Decrease or Redirect Behavior: Use a dog or human model as sample behavior. e.g., imitation, emulation, contagion



There is never a justification to use pain, fear, dominance devices or training methods with our dogs.

~ Linda Michaels, M.A. Psychology

Dogs, like us, need to feel safe, at peace and loved. They depend on us to fill these needs and we are obligated to do so.

~ Dr. Marc Bekoff, PhD - Animal Behavior

Dogs must be happy in order to learn, pay attention and problem solve.

~ Dr. Simon Gadbois, PhD - Animal Behavior



## Preparing for the arrival of your new dog

Whether the dog is being delivered to your home, or you are picking them up, it is essential that you have the necessary equipment for a safe transition. Some dogs might come from foster families, so might be slightly better adjusted, but the recommendations still apply. You will be removing the dog from what he knows as his home, so it is vital this is done safely and to minimise the stress on the dog.

When collecting the dog, **you will need:**

- Collar with ID tag (this should have your information including post code and phone number, not the dog's name as this can make it easier for thieves!)
- A lead (NOT extendable lead), a double ended training lead is best as you can attach to the harness and the collar for safety
- A slip lead (this is only for safety. This is technically an aversive tool if used for 'training' however it is vital when collecting rescue dogs as if spooked, they can easily slip a harness and collar in seconds. The slip lead is an emergency back up)
- A harness. A harness with a Y shape at the front is the best option as it does not affect the natural movement of the shoulder blades. If a dog is particularly nervous, it may not be possible to get a harness on. In this case it is vital to move the dog with the collar, lead and slip lead into safety ASAP.
- A crate to transport the dog. This works well as the crate can then be moved straight into the house without the chance of escape. If a crate isn't an option, the dog should be securely fitted into the car using a harness and seat belt restraint.
- It is advisable to have at least 2 adults for safety (no children) when collecting the dog in case the dog panics in the car
- Some water and a container to offer this in.

After collecting & arriving, **you must:**

- Take your dog straight into the house. If they are in a crate, carry them in the crate preferably with a blanket covering it so they are not overwhelmed. If they are in a seat belt restraint, carry them into the house whilst the 2<sup>nd</sup> person holds on to their lead/slip lead which should still be attached to them.
- Not walk them around the street or garden; dogs are very unlikely to go to the toilet when experiencing this amount of stress anyway.
- Keep a collar and trail lead (called a houseline in most pet shops) attached to your dog at all times in the house and garden. The slip lead can come off at this point.
- Give them some time to settle into the surroundings, after a while you may take them into the garden and can use some high value food placed on the floor to guide them out with you. When in the garden you **must** keep them on their lead and preferably also slip lead. These dogs can be very easily spooked and can slip their leads and jump fences to escape.
- Keep your dog in the house (allowing access outside to toilet) for at least 48 hours. You might also receive a visit from a DEFRA member (usually a vet) up to 4 weeks after arrival to check the paperwork, passport and microchip details are matching.
- Update your dog's **microchip details** with your own information. Just because the dog is chipped, it does not mean that it will help if he gets lost or is stolen. The information on the chip when your dog arrives will not be registered with a UK database, so the chip is effectively useless. This should be done as soon as your dog is at home.
- Leave a thin, short trail lead on attached to the dogs collar. This is for emergencies should you need to move your dog and they are not responding to you calling them over. This can be taken off after you have built more of a bond.

## First day and beyond:

- Provide your dog with a safe, comfortable resting space. Ideally more than one to choose from. An open, covered crate works well as it is dark and provides a safe retreat for the dog. Ensure the bed area is not in a very busy location of the house, but also not isolated. A quiet corner where the dog can see everyone but is not the centre of attention works best.
- Provide water in a bowl near the dog's resting area, some dogs are too frightened and stressed to move from this area and might not be brave enough to venture to take a drink. Ensure fresh water is always available. Do not force your dog to drink, however if you are sure they have not touched water for 24 hours then contact your vet.
- Offer some bland food initially; white meat/fish, rice, mashed pumpkin and carrots work well. This will not only be slightly more appetising to your dog but also may help to settle their stomach after the stressful journey. Offer little and often, but do not force your dog to eat. If they are comfortable moving around, you can feed outside to encourage sniffing or in a basic feeding enrichment toy.
- Keep calm and be patient. Some dogs will arrive ready to play and interact, others can take months. Go slow and most importantly go at your dog's pace. Give them plenty of time and space. **The easiest way to make friends with a nervous dog is to completely ignore them!**
- Never bother or disturb your dog when they are sleeping
- Take your dog to the garden on lead and allow them to sniff around and see if they will toilet. Treat as a puppy; take out after eating, sleeping, playing and every couple of hours (less if young). Praise them when they go outside. Never punish for going inside, simply clean this up with an enzymatic cleaner and then scatter some food on the area.
- Do not take your dog for a walk for at least a week. This is applicable to the more confident and relaxed dogs – take this time to work on housetraining, further confidence building (search 'freework for dogs'), harness and leash desensitisation, traffic noise desensitisation, recall and most importantly building a strong, positive bond using fun and games. For the more nervous dogs, be prepared that they may not go on walks for months. This should again be all at their pace and what they are comfortable with. For your first walk, alongside the harness and lead, a slip lead is advisable as an emergency back-up in case the dog slips the harness. Keep your dog on a long line (not extendable lead) in parks until you are at least 99% sure (I don't say 100% as dogs are still animals, and behaviour is affected by many things) they will recall back to you away from wildlife, children, strangers, bikes, other dogs, cats, bikes, joggers etc
- Avoid having visitors for at least 2 weeks whilst your dog is settling. When having visitors around for the first time, either have your dog greet the outside or have the dog in a separate room whilst the visitor settles in and then allow the dog in. You, the main carer, should reward your dog with tasty treats or toys when they greet the visitor so they associate them with good things. If they are nervous, ensure the visitor ignores the dog (no eye contact, no kissy noises, no fussing), you can simply give or gently throw high value treats *behind* the dog when the visitor is around. Never attempt to lure the dog to the visitor with treats (search 'treat/retreat for dogs')
- Begin to introduce feeding enrichment to provide essential mental stimulation including kongs, snuffle mats, scatter feeding, lickimats, puzzle feeders, slow feeders, treat balls, wobblers. Search online for new and interesting ways to provide your dog with enrichment! Scent work and search games are great for confidence building. Here is a fantastic video to get you started <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKI-lq1jeGk>
- Go slow with any handling introductions and never force restraint on your dog unless it is an emergency.
- Book secure fields to work on focus and recall with some peace of mind! <https://dogwalkingfields.com/>

## Introducing to household dogs & other pets:

- If your dog does not seem overly stressed or nervous, you can likely introduce on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day. If your dog is particularly stressed, give them a few more days to settle. Ideally the resident dog would stay with a family or friend however you can achieve the same effect by using baby gates and separate rooms to ensure the dogs don't come into contact together. You can give either dog something which smells of the other to investigate before the introduction.
- Meet outside if at all possible, neutral ground is best but the garden will suffice. Do not force the dogs to interact, allow them to sniff each other for 3-5 seconds and then call the resident dog away before allowing another sniff.
- Ensure the dog is kept on lead but do NOT tighten or place pressure on the lead, keep it loose and relaxed. It is your job to move with the dog as they greet to ensure leads do not become tangled/tighten.
- Ensure resources such as food, toys and beds are removed from the room in the house in which the dogs will be interacting at first, allow them time and space to explore and give gentle, verbal praise.
- Be proactive and manage interactions; use baby gates to ensure the dogs are never left alone unsupervised until you are 100% sure they are comfortable together. Always feed separately to prevent incidents.
- Begin to introduce beds, toys and other such resources into the room when the dogs are together slowly, don't make a big fuss of it and praise positive interactions.
- Do fun trick training with both dogs in the garden to establish a positive association and increase their focus on the handler when around each other, this may be easier achieved with 2 people doing it so that each dog has his own handler.



The first few weeks or even month or so may be incredibly stressful for both you, your family and your dog. It is an adjustment period for everyone. Remember to take time to yourself to relax; if you are stressed you will be less likely to make logical decisions. Whilst it is hard work, it is incredibly rewarding! By adopting you are not only saving your dog, but also making space in rescue to save another.

You may have to sleep near your dog for the first few weeks – they might be scared, confused and lonely. Do not leave your dog to cry it out if they are distressed. Comfort them, let them know you are there and teach them to enjoy spending time alone slowly. Every time you leave the room, leave your dog with some treats and do not make a big fuss when you return. Use baby gates to prevent your dog from following you everywhere, but always ensure that if they are being left alone it is a predictor of a tasty treat/fun toy coming.

It is much easier to prevent a problem, than to fix one. All dogs, but especially foreign rescues can develop some of the issues below simply because they have never had a home or family to call their own, and need a lot of calm guidance and positive management. If you begin to experience any behaviour issues (such as those listed below) always go slow, do not intimidate or confront your dog and contact us for advice straight away.

- Resource guarding
- Reactivity to people or dogs, especially household members
- Problems with house training
- Separation anxiety

- Very nervous and fearful behaviour
- Highly stressed behaviour

Remember that most behaviours regarded as 'problem' behaviours by humans are actually fairly natural and normal for dogs, they are just worrying to us if we do not understand why the dog is doing them. Be prepared that the dog may experience any one or many of the above behaviours throughout their lives; no dog is perfect and it isn't fair to expect these dogs to arrive and know how to be a 'pet'. The rescue will provide you with ongoing support, you can get external help from behaviourists but the most important work happens with you in day to day life.

To find a local behaviourist & trainer, search the following to ensure they are qualified. Unfortunately anyone can call themselves a trainer/behaviourist without having any qualifications:

- PPG <https://ppgbi.com/petguildmembers>
- APBC <https://www.apbc.org.uk/find-an-apbc-member/>
- APDT <https://apdt.co.uk/find-a-trainer/>
- DTC <https://www.findadogtrainer.co.uk/>

Take your time, enjoy each day, reward the behaviours you want to see repeated 😊

Please ensure you also read through the following to get the best head start before your dog arrives:

- "Your rescue dog" E Book
- "Positive canine coaching" E Book