

GET STARTED ON THE RIGHT PAW WITH A NEW DOG

By Phil Klein & Pat Wright, Certified Dog Listeners

Congratulations on adopting a dog! This is a wonderful act of kindness that will reward you in ways you cannot imagine.

Bringing a new dog home is filled with fun, excitement, and anticipation. However, the first few days and weeks are crucial to having a dog that is a joy. It is very troubling for adopter and dog alike, if Fido has to be returned because he became the dog from hell. With a little patience, understanding and work, you can avoid the problems, and enjoy the magic of owning a new dog.

The first thing to realize is that Fido understands nothing at all about your home or the human world. An apparently happy dog with a wagging tail is a misleading sign. In fact, if a dog has been in a shelter for an extensive period, he may show fear of doorways, stairs, and other things found in the common household. Thus, even if Fido looks happy, it is your job to help him adjust to your home and make him feel safe and secure. Here is how to get started on the right foot with Fido.

1. **Your most important job is to build a trusting relationship with Fido.** This starts when you pick him up at the shelter or from a transport. Upon seeing Fido, you'll probably want to shower him with love and affection. However, this will cause apprehension at best or near panic at worst. Just think about how you would feel if upon meeting a stranger, he or she got in your face, talked excitedly and then kissed you passionately.
2. It would be best if you can be home for a couple of days when you first get Fido. This will enable you to help things go smoothly and give Fido some valuable time to get used to your presence.
3. You and your family must have plan on how to bring your new dog home. This article will help you with this.
4. Eye contact means action in the canine world; so by itself, it's like asking a dog to do something without telling him what you want him to do. It puts pressure on the dog. In our world, it would be like someone saying "hey you" to you frequently. Naturally, you'd wonder what the person wanted and you'd get annoyed if the person didn't tell you.

On the other hand, it's appropriate to use eye contact (without staring) when working with a canine. Alpha wolves use eye contact to call subordinate pack members to them. So, when you want Fido to come, make eye contact and say "Fido come" in a pleasant voice.

5. Use Fido's name when working or interacting with him. Doing this tells him that you want his attention. However, as is true of eye contact, don't use Fido's name when you don't want his attention or you want to avoid acknowledging him.
6. Do not approach your dog as going toward him elevates his status and may put pressure on him too. Pack leaders do not go to subordinate pack members, so call your dog to you when you want to interact/give affection.

7. At any time Fido appears scared, do not sooth or comfort him. It's a normal human reaction to do this, but you'll only reinforce Fido's fear and make him think you're scared too.

PICKING UP FIDO

As already noted, when you first see your new dog, don't make a big fuss. The best way for you (and other family members) to receive Fido is by being calm and matter-of-fact. Calm is the key here and always when interacting with a dog. Dogs are very sensitive to human emotions. Yelling, scolding, hitting or other displays of emotions will reinforce the wrong behaviors and cause your dog to become stressed.

Okay, you are either in a parking lot or a shelter with your dog on a leash and you are ready to head home. By everyone being calm and not fawning over Fido, he has had the chance to sort things out a bit.

Since a dog does not understand our world, it will help Fido relax if you show some leadership at this point. This can be done by using a little exercise called Stop, Start, Change Direction (SSCD) to show Fido that you're the one who decides where to go.

With the leash on and Fido by your side, you'll take a few steps forward, stop and then change direction. You can use small tidbits to reward Fido occasionally during this exercise. Do this for several minutes, keeping in mind that you do not have to be perfect about it. SSCD is a way of saying to your dog, "follow me".

If your dog has to follow you, this means you are in the lead position, which is where all decisions are made from in a pack. Remember, dogs inherited their instincts from their close cousin the wolf and are of a pack mentality. Also, this little exercise will give your dog a chance for a potty break if needed.

ARRIVAL AT HOME

After the quiet ride home, do SSCD in your driveway or yard to assure Fido that no matter where you are together, you are still the decision maker for him. This is another reinforcement of your status as pack leader.

If Fido has not done his business yet, lead him to the area where you want him to toilet. You might calmly say get busy a few times and if he toilets, praise him. "Good boy Fido, good boy." Then bring Fido into your home making sure you go in the door first. When leaving or entering the home, pack leaders go first.

On lead, bring Fido to his "small world" (see next page) and leave the leash on. Just sit and let Fido sniff and assess his surroundings. If you see Fido start to look anxious, calmly pick up his leash without acknowledging him and sit back down. Gently pull Fido close to you and relax. To avoid putting pressure on Fido, do not make eye contact, talk to him or pet him. This tells Fido that you are calm and there is nothing here to worry about.

Once you see Fido relax, let go of the leash and keep disregarding him. Remember, do not approach him. After Fido has relaxed for several minutes, you can call him to you and give him

some affection. One-by-one, your children can call him too. If Fido does not come even for a food reward, let him be. He just needs more time to get comfortable and get used to you.

By going through this process and not overwhelming Fido with eye contact, talk and affection, you teach Fido self-control and that he is safe. If he comes when you call, this is another demonstration that you are the leader.

Remember, Fido understands nothing about the human world or your home. Thus, at first you'll want to keep his world small so he has a chance to adjust and become comfortable. Then, you'll gradually expand his world. First, to the rest of your home, excluding areas you don't want Fido in. Then, you'll expose Fido to more of your yard if you have one. Last, you'll gradually expand into areas beyond your yard or the area where he has been toileting.

You may be wondering why all this adjustment is necessary. Introducing a dog to a new home and territory is akin to learning how to swim. If you've had swimming lessons, you know that you do a lot of work in shallow water first. Then, as you learn and gain confidence, you gradually move into deeper water and later to larger bodies of water.

Incidentally, many "dog experts" tell dog owners to socialize their dogs. This is the same as trying to learn to swim in deep water. So, let's keep the bigger picture in mind. A bit of patience and work now will lead to many, many years of enjoyment with your dog. Once Fido knows that he can count on you to protect him, he's very likely to go just about anywhere with you and be a joy to bring along.

SMALL WORLD

Okay, so where will Fido's small world be? A room with the following characteristics will serve well:

- You can keep Fido in the room with a gate or two.
- It has a floor that can be cleaned easily if Fido has an accident. Incidentally, you may wish to use a crate until you know that Fido is toilet trained. Usually, dogs will not toilet where they sleep.
- Members of the family are in or near the room often, as we want Fido to be a part of the family.
- The room or area Fido is in can be dog-proofed. This means Fido can't get his choppers on electric cords, valuables, books, garbage, paper products, plants, food or anything that would cause him harm.

Often a kitchen will be a suitable room. But, don't leave food on the counter as dogs are opportunistic eaters. And, you don't want to set up your dog to fail. He has no idea that the food isn't for him.

Keep Fido and other pets separated until he is comfortable with your family. Remember, Fido may have never lived with a cat or rabbit. Also, Fido may not get along at first with other dogs you have. Thus, initial exposures should be through a gate when he is calm. If he gets upset, calmly and quietly take him away, and then let him settle. Try again, but if Fido gets upset again, wait a day. Keep in mind that Fido is a predator at heart, so he should never have access to small animals like gerbils, guinea pigs and rabbits.

WHAT'S THIS PACK LEADER STUFF?

Okay, so what is this pack leader stuff all about anyway? Are not dog owners pack leaders automatically? After all, the owner feeds the dog and cares for it in a variety of ways. To understand why dog ownership does not equate to leadership, we have to look to the wolf pack, as dogs evolved from wolves. Regardless of breed, shape, sex or size, the dog's DNA is less than a whisker different from the DNA of a wolf. Thus, the dog is compelled by DNA to be a part of a pack and to have a pack leader. We have taken the dog from the wolf pack and changed its look, but we have not changed their pack mindset. Even the little Chihuahua thinks like a wolf.

Dog behavior in the aftermath of Katrina was a great example of dog mentality. The dogs that survived formed packs with pack leaders to hunt and survive. Basic wolf and undomesticated canine instincts took over.

Given its pack mentality, the dog is well-suited to being a follower in our world. If a dog sees its owner as its trusted pack leader, it takes its cues from him or her. Then, the dog will feel safe and secure and will eagerly cooperate with its owner based on its natural instincts. Being a subordinate pack member is a bit like winning the lottery because Fido's only jobs are to eat, sleep and play.

On the other hand, as pack leader, a canine (whether wolf or dog) believes it is responsible for the survival of its pack. The dog takes this job very seriously, just as it would in the wild. However, as dogs do not understand the human world, they are under constant stress in the pack leader role. This is because we are asking our dog to make decisions in our world, including decisions for protecting its domestic pack.

PACK LEADERS COME & GO AS THEY PLEASE

This is a leadership signal you will want to test first to see if Fido gets anxious. With Fido gated into his small world or in his crate, just get up and leave your home without acknowledging him in any way. Count to 10, come back in and do not acknowledge Fido in any way. See how long it takes for him to settle. If Fido is anxious for several minutes or longer (paces, whines, tries to get your attention), you'll want to repeat this exercise many times.

Leaving Fido and reuniting without acknowledgement is a very important leadership signal. It is not rude or cruel to disregard him. It's what Fido expects of you as his leader. By disregarding Fido, you show him that you are not ill or injured and that he does not have to worry about you. In effect, you demonstrate that you are a capable leader versus being his pup and requiring him to care for you.

So, any time you separate from Fido (close yourself behind a door) and reunite, do not acknowledge him. When you reunite, let Fido settle and relax for several minutes. Then, you can call him to you, praise him and give him affection. As Fido gets acclimated, he will quickly settle and go into relax mode. Thus, the several minutes of relaxation required previously will melt down gradually to 30 seconds or so.

CLOSING THOUGHTS & RESOURCES

This article will give you a good start on how to introduce your dog to his new home just as a pack leader would introduce his pack to a new territory. We encourage you to learn more about the nature of the dog and pack leadership. Excellent resources for this are the books [The Dog Listener](#) written by Jan Fennell and [Why Does My Dog Do That?](#) written by Caroline Spencer. Both books are available through Amazon.com. The Dog Listener DVD is also another excellent resource, and is available from Jan's website <http://www.janfennellthedoglistener.com/>.

Please remember that bringing a dog home from a shelter or rescue organization is not like bringing home a new TV or toy. Dogs are thinking, feeling animals that in their own way, ask lots of questions about who is in charge and where they fit in your family. So do your homework and give Fido the right answers by having the foresight to understand how he thinks. If you have questions or would like more information, please feel free to contact Phil at 860-604-0996 or at philthedoglistener@gmail.com.