

Adopting your dog



What is a dog? We have been domesticating dogs as pets for more than 30,000 years and while our knowledge and understanding of their medical and behavioural needs has matured in the last 30 years, we still sometimes struggle to understand the stresses on a dog coming into rescue.

Our domestic dog evolved from a wolf, and some of our dogs' behaviours and needs still reflect this, however, it is essential to recognise that they are different species and their behaviours will differ significantly from their wild ancestor or for the canine role they have been bred for in the human world. It's important to remember that a lot of these behaviours are natural, and cannot and should not be suppressed. However as dogs live among humans, they do may require a high degree of training and some rescue dogs need more effort than others. Before you do take on a dog, please consider whether a dog is the right pet for you. If you are some way along the adoption process, do feel free to tell us if you are having second thoughts and we will do our best to help.

They are social animals... They will have grown up in an environment where they learned from their littermates how to behave with other dogs, but they will also need this behavioural development to continue when they are weaned and separated from their family. A major problem we encounter with dogs coming into our care is a lack of socialisation (learning how to be around other dogs and around humans) and a lack of training and "manners". This can lead to fraught interactions with other dogs and with people, confusing for the dog who is trying to understand where he or she fits in with any newly met humans or dogs. In your home, the dog will want to know and understand his or her environment and you should ensure that he or she is not given confusing messages or overwhelmed with too much activity too soon.

They are predator animals... That means they may have an instinct to chase smaller things, especially true of certain breeds. This in itself should not be a problem but you do need to gauge behaviour in this regard before you let the dog off the lead for the first time. How a dog will get on with a cat depends on each dog—but also will depend on the cat as well. And of course, remember that in certain breeds, these behaviours will be pronounced and you need to consider whether this is the right breed. Never select a breed or type just on looks and shape!

Can I adopt two dogs? Should I add a new dog to an existing dog household?

We sometimes house two dogs in the same kennel here at the Refuge. In all cases, this will be because they get on with each other but this won't always mean they need to be rehomed together. Equally, it won't necessarily mean that each of these dogs will get on with all other dogs.

While you shouldn't feel the need to have more than one, dogs do need regular company and therefore we advise that two dogs might be better if they are likely to be on their own for longer periods.

How do I know if my existing dog will accept a new one? We'll arrange for your new dog and existing one to meet before the rehoming process completes. In most cases this will be in a neutral area away from the kennels. Sometimes we may also then suggest a trial meeting at your home.

Will they fight? As the first meeting will be carefully supervised, fighting should not occur. At this initial meeting we will normally get a good indicator of potential compatibility based on each individual's reaction to the other. We normally rehome our dogs to a home where all current dogs are neutered.



What routine should they be in?

Currently our dogs are fed between 8.00 am and 9.00 am and again just before 5 pm. They have access to runs all night to come and go as they please.

We recommend that the very first thing you do in the morning, as early as you can, is to take the dog out for a toilet run, especially if it is one who "holds". Feeds should be twice a day and we will advise on the number of walks needed as this will depend on the individual. Try and spread the walks out as far as possible across the day. Dogs' natural behaviours are bursts of activity followed by rest periods, so ensure the dog gets a resting-up break in the middle of the day for at least 2 hours where they are left completely alone.

Should I take time off when the dog comes home?

Not for more than one day — you need to ensure that the dog comes home to the most normal activity / routine pattern that represents its future lifestyle.



Before coming home

Make sure you have everything ready at home and the dog's sleeping area, water bowls and general access set up before he or she arrives. If you have made a decision to restrict the dog from certain parts of the house, make sure bolts, dog-gates and latches are fitted where needed, and all the household understands the restriction.

Speak to the children calmly beforehand, before the dog is there to explain the behaviour expected of them. Make sure that your children understand that the dog is not a toy, and they cannot prod, poke, or otherwise provoke the dog, nor pull legs or tails. It is a good idea to set up a den for your dog where it is not disturbed at any time, so they can always find a little peace and quiet if they want it. If you are not confident that your children will do this, we strongly advise not having a dog until they are older. Of course, be especially careful of puppies who are very vulnerable. Avoid bringing lots of the children's friends round until the dog is a little adjusted and settled in its new home.

No risks should be taken until you are confident that the dog has good social skills with other dogs, children, visitors, callers at the door etc and is fully adjusted to its new home. Take care with toys when there are children or other dogs until you determine how possessive the dog is towards these. Maintain calmness—this means no tug and pull or play-fighting. Just lead walk or undertake activities that require mental stimulation such as 'search games' as much as possible.



What do I need to have ready?

Bed, water and food bowls, brush, spare bedding, strong lead and a spare lead. Collar and tag with your contact details (phone number alone will do) (and toys).

What do I do on the first day? When you get your new dog home, before entering your house, take the dog for a long lead walk at a reasonably fast pace, in the area of your home (actual time and speed will be determined by the age and health of the dog but do the most possible). This is to ensure that the dog is calmer when entering the new home. Then, on entering the house, show your new dog around, on the lead, in the areas he is allowed to go. Keep him on the lead for some time whilst he investigates the scents of the house and people. Balance the need to give him the opportunity to check out the house without making a huge fuss and commotion, with retaining your control as an owner. At all times (not just the beginning), avoid the temptation to over-excite him and play rough, especially if you have young children. It is a good idea, until he is settled and realises where he fits into the home environment, to restrict access to the upstairs and to any bedrooms.



How long will the dog take to settle? Dogs tend to settle remarkably quickly, and their focus is on people rather than the home, so as long as they have had the opportunity to meet and establish a relationship with their new family, this should happen very quickly. Bear in mind what we describe "the honeymoon period" during which time the dog is assessing your behaviour and determining what he can get away with! This period can last up to 4 weeks and it is often after this period that the reason for the dog being handed to rescue in the first place becomes apparent.

Transporting in the car? Start as you mean to go on! Dogs should never be transported in the front seats of the car and should, for their welfare, be either contained in a crate or cage, or behind a dog guard or with a doggy seatbelt. Just as you would protect your family with seatbelts, its important to protect your dog.

Will the dog be well behaved and obedient? Every dog is different—remember to reinforce good behaviour with reward and avoid punishing bad behaviour with shouting or smacking. Dogs don't understand being told off, and if you think they look guilty, it's really fear.

What about toileting? We will advise you on any issues with the dog's current toileting—please try and stick closely to the current routine initially, and try and limit the amount of time between toilet intervals. Do allow for the occasional "accident" in the early days. A new home together with a change in routine and/or diet can have an effect on the digestive system. Clean up any fouling with a product such as "Simple Solution" which is non-ammonia based.

What about sleeping places? As mentioned above, give the dog his or her own sleeping place, make this a strictly no-go area for children to disturb the dog, and ideally keep the sleeping place downstairs.



Food: Feed good quality, low protein, low fat, highly digestible, complete dog food from a reputable source and brand, and possibly with a hint of tinned food to introduce taste. This will reduce the number and size of faeces passed each day. Feed twice daily and at least an hour after exercise. Keep the food consistent, avoid any sudden changes, and make sure you have plenty in stock. Avoid feeding leftovers and treats, and be aware that home-made diets, unless prepared meticulously to provide balanced nutrition, can be a hazard. Avoid bones which may splinter and damage the mouth or cause obstruction.

Attention and jumping up: Especially during the first few weeks (longer in some circumstances), try to establish some “ground –rules”, rewarding positive behaviour and ensuring any negative behaviour, e.g. jumping up, is not rewarded with your attention. Take some time to train some new skills and teach your dog to say “please” while building a strong bond with him/her through training activities. Initiate the start and ending of any games or training sessions and Monitor your dog’s excitement level carefully so activities remain positive experiences for both of you and things don’t become out of control.

Be careful to avoid giving your dog prolonged direct eye contact as a sign of your affection and love. A long gaze between dogs is seen as a challenge, and any staring may cause him to feel uncomfortable and threatened.

When can I let the dog off the

lead? Allow a couple of weeks before you allow the dog off the lead. Make sure that the dog is confident and comfortable with you, and most importantly,

don’t allow the dog off the lead unless you are sure he or she will respond to a recall command. Slowly build this training up using a flexi-lead. Be aware that dogs must be kept on leads and under control in many public places.



Dog meeting cats: Sometimes it can be easier to introduce a cat to a dog, than a cat being introduced to another cat, and cats seem to find this meeting easier to deal with. Any meeting should be staggered and gradually the level of contact built up. You can improve the likelihood of success by following all these tips—providing a safe place for the cat to escape to (especially up high), exchange bedding between the cat and dog, and prevent the dog gaining access to the cat’s safe place. Don’t ever force the issue (i.e. don’t plonk the cat in front of the dog as this will encourage hissing, growling and lashing out.)

Being left: One of the commonest problems is dogs’ behaviours when they are left alone. If you think that it is likely that there are going to be circumstances when a dog is going to be regularly left for long periods, then consider how to avoid this—or if unavoidable, then maybe a cat is more suitable than a dog.



Building up the length of time the dog is left alone in small increments is a great way of increasing their tolerance, rewarding good behaviour when that happens and never punishing bad. If you have had issues with a dog previously which have resulted in the dog being given up, it is important that you discuss these

NEVER, EVER, try pushing the boundaries, provoking the dog, or bullying the dog, as this may well result in you getting hurt. Use positive training methods and contact us for advice before applying methods you may have seen on TV.

MSPCA, St Francis Ravelin Street, Floriana. Tel 21 234431.

www.spcamalta.org