

SHELTER DOGS AND TRAINING

So he landed in a city shelter, or maybe a rescue. Perhaps he's lucky enough to be in a foster home. What sort of training is easy for the volunteers or staff to implement, but will help him get adopted and keep his new home, too?

Some dogs have true behavioral issues, like aggression towards people or dogs, guarding their food, attacking cats, or separation anxiety. While some should not be rehomed, many of these dogs need help from an experienced trainer, and very special placement.

Many dogs that wind up homeless simply lack basic training, and good manners, which is not hard to fix. Unfortunately these dogs also get looked over because of simple behavior issues that are easy to work on, even in a shelter environment.

So what are some things we can do for dogs waiting for a new home? First, a **“trained” dog is a big plus when looking for a new companion.** Most people consider a dog “trained” when he is housebroken, and knows basic commands like Sit, Down, Come, Stay and polite leash walking. All of these behaviors are easy to teach in a short time with regular training sessions. For most dogs, food and a 6 foot leash is all you need.

- Houstraining can be taught by teaching “Go Potty” when he goes outside, along with praise and maybe a treat. Kenneled dogs should be walked often, to teach them that a clean kennel is a nice feeling. For dogs in foster care, a properly sized crate is a handy tool.
- Sit and Down can be taught easily with food-- raise the treat just above and behind the dog's head, until he plops his butt to the ground (don't say sit yet). When he's got the hang of it, begin saying “Sit.” just before you make your move. Down can be taught the same way, just take the treat from his nose, to the floor until his elbows touch the ground.
- Come is very important! Let him go to the end of his six foot leash in a non distracting environment. Call his name, say “Come!” and run backwards, offering a treat. He gets the treat when he catches you. Let him learn how fun it is to run towards you! Make sure you can touch his collar before he gets his treat. (hint: if he's not interested, try a better treat, a toy, or a less distracting environment.)
- Stay can be taught by asking him to sit, show your hand in a “stop sign” fashion and say “stay,” and count to 3. Praise or treat him, and tell him “Okay!” to release him. Gradually build up the amount of time he can stay, and only then can you begin taking steps away. If he gets up, quickly guide him back into the sit position. (hint: stay should be used at doorways to prevent bolting!)
- Walking on leash can be tough for an energetic, kenneled dog- but not impossible. Leash manners begin the instant the leash goes on. Don't move forward until the dog is calm, to set the pace for your walk. Each time he lunges forward, Pivot the other direction and walk the other way and praise him when he's at your side again. Alternatively, you can stop right where you are and let him figure out that walking doesn't resume until he stops pulling on the leash, and becomes attentive to you. Treats can be used to teach him to stay by your side, either by luring him with a treat as you walk, or giving him praise and a treat whenever he is at your side. There are a variety of training tools available to assist you with dogs who are strong pullers, consult a trainer on the proper use of these tools!

Second, **basic manners like not jumping on people, not barking excessively or mouthing, and not bursting out of the kennel door are an excellent way to increase adoptability.**

- Always wait until the dog is calm and NOT pushing out of the kennel door before releasing him with an “okay!” You can do this by asking him to sit, or simply closing the door every time he attempts to bolt.
- Teach him “off,” when he jumps on visitors, and ask him to sit before you pet him. The handler should use the leash to prevent him from jumping on a visitor. Remember the “four on the floor” rule, which means he only gets attention when four feet are on the floor! Nobody should pet him while his feet are on a person.
- Mouthing can be fixed in the same fashion, by petting the dog (and perhaps even offering treats) while he’s not using his mouth, and shouting “Ouch!” and immediately stopping all attention when he puts his mouth on skin. These dogs should be directed to a toy when mouthing is likely to occur, however, be aware of dogs who may become aggressive about their toys.
- Dogs who are barking should be ignored completely (back turned, no looking or speaking) until a few moments of silence are offered. Then he can be rewarded with the petting, toys, or walking that he wanted.

Dogs in a shelter environment tend to bark, pace, jump, and sometimes, they shy away and hide in a corner. Over time, we can change that behavior by rewarding what we like. Perhaps, each kennel has a dog treat pail out the outside, or each volunteer carries food in their pocket. If they happen to walk by the kennel and the dog is standing quietly or sitting, he gets a treat. If he’s barking, she walks on by. Our nervous dogs can get a treat if they are simply sitting up, coming towards the front of the kennel, or looking towards the person. Pretty soon, each dog will stand or sit quietly for a treat, looking good and ready for adoption.

If the setting allows, **dogs who have some sort of enrichment are going to be happier, well adjusted, and more well behaved.** Volunteers can take the dogs for walks, outings, and play or training sessions to help them be less stressed in their environment. All dogs should have a chance to “decompress” and be assessed before these types of activities commence.

Tricks can be helpful, too, for trying to get our adoptables into a home and to keep an energetic dog busy. A dog that will Shake, tilt their head, rollover or play dead is very cute, and obviously very smart! There are various resources for learning how to teach simple tricks, including the book “101 Dog Tricks” by Kyra Sundance.

Remember, hiding behavior problems will do nothing helpful to find a dog his forever home. If he has an issue, make sure adopters are aware of it, and *how easy it is to fix with a trainer*. Highlight the qualities of each dog, and make sure that people know what a fantastic temperament he has, or how great he is with meeting new people (or anything else he may have going for him!). Lying about or omitting information about an adoptable dog is likely going to have him sent right back to the shelter, or worse. Good evaluations of the dogs and screening of adopters will help everybody in the long run.

Remember that all volunteers (and visitors) should be aware and respectful of the training each dog is receiving, otherwise it may not be successful. Use Notes and face to face communication to make sure everybody is on the same page! Just about any behavior can be improved or changed!