

Getting Started with Your New Dog

Congratulations on welcoming a new dog into your family! The MSPCA-Angell adoption center teams are here to support you and your new pet as they transition into your home. Please reach out to us directly with any questions or concerns as you get to know each other.

DECOMPRESSION: Living at the shelter is an inherently stressful experience, and your new pet has been through several other stressful transitions before arriving at your home. To support them through this next transition, they will need some time to decompress, meaning:

- Keep their world small and predictable:
 - Use gates, closed doors, and ex-pens to limit their access to a small part of house to start – see **confinement space** for more information.
 - Avoid asking them to meet new people or dogs outside of your household for the first two weeks (at least).
 - Avoid going out on the town or to any new environments. Ideally, you will have a firm foundation for communicating with each other before you begin to introduce new people, dogs, or places to the equation.
- Focus on observing their behavior and body language to better get to know your new dog - identify likes and dislikes, and make adjustments to their space and your interactions with them accordingly.
- Let them sniff! Walk a shorter distance and focus on letting your dog explore their new environment. Sniffing is proven to be a calming activity, so encouraging it will help with the decompression process.
- Consider how other animals in the home will impact your dog's decompression period. For a multi-dog household, **see Dog Introductions for a Multi-Dog Household handout**. For homes with a cat, **see Dog and Cat Introductions handout**.

There is no formula for how long your dog will take to transition into your home – some adjust very easily, while others need more time and support. See **body language** to learn how to identify what your dog might need from you.

BODY LANGUAGE: Dogs communicate through their behavior and body language. While there are often similarities among how dogs communicate, each animal is an individual and will communicate in their own unique way. You'll spend the first several days, weeks, and months observing your new dog to learn their specific form of communication. As you get to know them better, you'll easily be able to tell when they are uncomfortable, when they are excited, when they are relaxed, etc. You can use that information to guide how they interact with the world around them.



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GIVE THEM CHOICE: Each dog is an individual with likes and dislikes, deserving agency, or choice, over who they interact with and when. Even the happiest or most friendly dog might not want to say hello or get a pat from every new person they meet, electing instead to say “no thanks” to a snuggle, or to rest on their own for a bit. **We can add to our dogs’ quality of life by giving them choice.** To do that, start by becoming an expert in reading your dog’s body language, become a diligent practitioner of a “petting consent test”, and encourage people who interact with your dog (and others!) to do the same. Aim to allow your dog to initiate every interaction by waiting for them to approach you. Once they’ve approached, check for consent both before beginning to pet, and throughout your interaction to ensure they have the option to continue opting in or to let you know when they are done. **Search “petting consent test” on YouTube** to watch a short video example presented by DogKind.

MANAGEMENT: Management refers to limiting the number of “wrong” choices your dog has access to, so that they are more likely to make the “right” choice. Look around your home through the lens of puppy proofing (even if your dog isn’t a puppy!), as we can’t expect that any dog coming into our home knows yet what we expect of them. We have to teach them, and the most effective way to do that while also facilitating a strong, lasting relationship is to find as many ways to say “yes” as possible. If we’re constantly saying “no”, we’re not helping them understand what we do want them to do, and are creating a lot of frustration and confusion for both us and our dog. Instead, take away as many choices that might prompt you to say “no”, so they aren’t even an option to start with.

- **Limit access to a small part of the house to start.** Use baby gates and closed doors to keep them in a smaller, more easily puppy-proofed space as they are settling in.
- **Puppy-proof!** Remove anything that you’d be upset if your dog chews up or pees on. Blankets and pillows should be stored in a closet, shoes and socks should not be left by the door, remote controls should be in the drawer, etc. Anything that doesn’t need to be out should be put away.
- **Consider leaving a leash dragging in the house** throughout the transition period, particularly for a very rowdy or very fearful dog. This limits the need for close handling near the collar for leashing up, and gives you an easier and less invasive way to gently guide your dog away from something you might want to move them away from.
- **Create structure to the day.** Your dog should have little to no time when they are left to entertain themselves on their own. Instead, schedule the day in a way that provides ample opportunity for physical and mental stimulation, followed by structured settle time once all of their other needs have been met. Structured settled time includes using a secure **confinement space** with plenty of appropriate options to help your dog relax, like working on a frozen Kong, a puzzle feeder, or a bully stick.



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CONFINEMENT: Create a quiet space as your dog's "home base". Don't rely on physical confinement alone, pair it with the necessary behavioral management as well. They should only spend time in the confinement space after having some time to get used to the space with you, and following plenty of physical and mental stimulation, with an empty bladder, and with plenty of appropriate activities to keep them busy as they wind down for a nap. The space should be:

- **Private:** in a low-traffic area so your dog can easily to relax without seeing or hearing things going on in the home.
- **Puppy-proofed:** your dog is still learning the rules. Remove anything you'd prefer they don't put in their mouth, then gradually allow more access to items as they are successful.
- **Secure:** start with a gate, exercise pen, or closed door.
- **To crate or not to crate:** teaching your dog to love their appropriately-sized crate using positive reinforcement has many benefits, including providing a safe, secure place for them to settle, preventing destructive behavior or accidents when unsupervised, and providing a management tool for times when they need a break or when you need them out of the way.
- **Do not** close your dog in a crate before teaching them to settle inside comfortably. Closing a dog in a crate before they are ready can cause your dog to bark, pace, go to the bathroom, or try to escape, which can cause injury to your dog and make crate training much more difficult going forward. **See our crate training handout** for more information.
- **Play some white noise** (search white noise on youtube, classical music, sound machine, fan) to block out noises as your dog is getting used to the new space.



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HOUSETRAINING: Even with adult dogs who have lived in a home before, you should expect some accidents as a result of the stressful transitions they have experienced in the past several weeks (or longer). If your new pet is a young dog, or one who has never lived in a home, you can expect to put in a lot of work (and patience!) as you help them learn to go to the bathroom outside. **See our housetraining handout** for more information.

Note: if your new dog is very fearful, you'll have to start by helping them feel more comfortable and secure in their new environment before working on housetraining. See your adoption counselor with questions.

- **Schedule:** start a regular feeding and bathroom schedule right away. Start by taking them outside as frequently as possible (every 30-60 minutes to start, ideally).
- **Location:** go outside on leash or in a securely enclosed space to the same potty area (preferably grass or dirt).
- **Potty before fun:** potty breaks are separate from play time, walks, or exploring the yard. If your dog doesn't go to the bathroom after 5-10 minutes, take them back inside and try again later.
- **Party time:** when they go to the bathroom outside, throw a party! Tell them how smart they are, give them a cookie, or pull out their favorite toy. Now play time or your walk can begin.
- **Never** punish or scold for accidents, whether you catch them in the act or find it later. Use of force/intimidation can make them afraid to go in front of you, and can make potty breaks less successful and more frustrating.
- **Clean up:** be sure to thoroughly clean any accidents in the house with an enzymatic cleaner.

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CRATE TRAINING: Crate training is a functional way to keep your dog safe while unsupervised, give him a comfortable place to rest, allows you to travel with your companion more easily, along with many other benefits. As with any new skill your dog will need to be taught how to settle comfortable in their crate, should you decide to use one. It is important that you introduce your dog to their crate gradually, and never shut them inside when they aren't already trained to relax in that space. **See our Crate Training handout** for more information.

- **Location:** set the crate up in an area of your home that is quiet and comfortable but also allows visual access for both you and your dog to see one another to start.
- **Door open:** leave the crate door open at all times - see confinement section of this handout for information about keeping your dog safely confined without the use of a crate.
- **Surprise snacks:** periodically leave treats in the crate when your dog is not paying attention so that they find them later when they wander near or into the crate.
- **When they get it right:** anytime you see your dog in their crate take a few minutes to calmly pet them from the outside of the crate. If you see them laying down in the crate, pet them for even longer.
- **Meal time:** Feed your dog their meals in the crate (with the door open).



LEARNING: Animals are always learning, whether we are intentionally teaching or not. It's our responsibility to help them learn the right thing, and to teach them in a way that creates a strong, trusting relationship based on clear communication between us and our pets. See our **training philosophy** handout for more information.

- **MANAGEMENT:** Arrange the environment to prevent access to "wrong" choices, making it more likely for your dog to make the "right" choice, and allowing you to say "yes" more often.
- **REINFORCEMENT:** Take **EVERY** opportunity to tell your dog they've done something smart! Even a simple behavior like feet on the ground – the more you reinforce a behavior, the more your dog will do it.
- **MISTAKES HAPPEN:** They are still learning! Ignore, or **neutrally** (without raising your voice or physically manipulating the dog) end the interaction and move onto something else. Make a note about what went wrong to better set them up for success the next time.

SOCIABILITY: After their decompression period, take time to observe your dog's behavior around other dogs. Pay close attention to their body language to get a better understanding of whether or not they enjoy interacting with other dogs, and what type of behaviors they like to engage in (chasing, wrestling, exploring, etc.). It's important to recognize that dogs don't always like interacting with other dogs, and forcing an interaction when either dog is uncomfortable can lead to bad behavior that can escalate over time. Avoid interactions with unknown dogs on leash or in an uncontrolled setting like a dog park, opting instead for smaller, supervised playdates with known dogs.



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SOCIALIZATION: an important part of helping your new puppy grow into a well-adjusted, emotionally resilient animal.

It is:

- **Careful, intentional** intros to people, places, and things
- **At a low level** so your dog has a neutral or positive experience
- **Paired with something good** like a cookie
- **Aborted** if your dog exhibits fearful or overly excited behavior.

It isn't:

- Exposure to something new at close proximity or for a long time, regardless of the dog's response
- Passive or unstructured exposure without an option to abort if things aren't going well
- An assumption that with enough exposure your dog will figure it out on their own, outgrow, or eventually get used to something they are afraid of.



new people
Let your dog approach **at his own pace**, if and when he wants to.

Associate new people with **wonderful things**.

BACON!

Make sure puppies are **gently & positively exposed** to different people.

children, beards, seniors, people carrying & wearing stuff, different ethnicities, people on wheelchairs...

other animals
Always check that the other animal is friendly & tolerant of dogs before you let your dog approach.

Can my dog say Hi? Um... Better not.

Teach your dog how to act **politely around other animals** by rewarding him for good behavior. Redirect him if he's pushy or overly excited.

Over here! Good Boy! WHEW! SHAKE SHAKE

If your adult dog doesn't want to play with unfamiliar dogs, that's okay. Adult people don't want to play with every other person we meet either!

Let's go. Thank you, Mom! RUFF! RUFF! RUFF!

new things & environments
To prevent **noise phobia** (eg, fear of thunder), feed your dog a tiny treat every time the noise happens.

BOOM! **CHICKEN!**

CHEESE!

Introduce young dogs to lots of **different surfaces**.

gravel, tile floors, concrete, carpet, bridges, plastic, rubber, snow, sand, etc.

Take rides in a boat, train car, or elevator.

WOOHOO!

Visit the **vet & groomer's** just for treats and petting.

YAY!

YUM!

Teach your dog to **enjoy wearing a muzzle** by making it into a "treat basket"

Avoid truly scary situations, such as fireworks.

Visit parking lots and other busy places just to watch the people, animals, vehicles, etc. and feed your dog treats.

This is FUN.

Remember: EXPOSURE alone isn't socialization!

If your dog isn't having a great time, you could do more harm than good. Dogs don't just "get over" issues by themselves, so if your dog is shy, worried, or overly excited, leave the situation and work with a professional who can help both of you. If your dog is having a blast and is happy and comfortable, you're doing a great job of socializing him!

Words by Sara Reusche www.paws4u.com Drawings by Lili Chin www.doggiedrawings.net



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RESOURCE GUARDING: Refers to behavior a dog exhibits when trying to communicate they are uncomfortable with a person or animal near their resource. This might look like running away with an item, becoming very still, looking at you out of the corner of their eye, growling, snapping, or biting. While this may never pose a challenge for you and your new pup, it is important to know what to look for and to contact us if you are concerned at all with your dog's behavior.

Prevention is key! Teach your new dog that it is **safe** and normal for a person to be in their vicinity while they are eating or otherwise interacting with something they really find valuable.

The most effective way to do this is to avoid putting unnecessary pressure on your dog when they are eating.

DO NOT pet your dog while they are eating, attempt to repeatedly remove their bowl, or insist on handfeeding your dog to “get them used to” people interacting with their food.

DO give your dog plenty of space from other people or animals while they are eating or chewing a bone.

DO toss snacks to your dog if you have to pass by them while they are eating or chewing on a bone.

DO puppy-proof your space to reduce the chance of your dog finding something you need to remove from their mouth.



SELECTING A TRAINER AND VETERINARIAN: The team you select to support you in raising your dog will play a formative role in what you and they learn as you grow together. The importance of making the right choice cannot be overstated. We recommend working with animal care professionals who subscribe to a science based, positive reinforcement approach to teaching new behavior, and a force-free, Fear Free approach to medical care. Some questions to consider as you select your dog's animal care team include:

DOG TRAINER (see our [How to Choose a Dog Trainer handout](#) for more information):

- What exactly will happen to my dog when they get it right?
- What exactly will happen to my dog if they get it wrong?
- Are there less invasive/aversive alternatives to what you propose?

Visit mspca.org/programs-resources for behavior and training services in Boston, Methuen, and Waltham.

VETERINARIAN:

- Are you and your staff Fear Free certified?
- What exactly will happen if my dog is experiencing fear or anxiety before, during, or after a visit?
- Will I be able to stay with my dog for the duration of their appointment?
- Do you offer “Happy Visits” to help my dog get more comfortable in the space and with the staff?



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