



## Rescue Dogs

This article is designed to help people, who are either thinking of adopting a rescue dog, or have adopted a rescue dog and want to better understand how to integrate their new addition into their family.

### What is a rescue dog?

Lives are unpredictable. Sometimes people are forced through unforeseen circumstances to surrender their dogs to rescue centres. Unfortunately however a lot of dogs that find themselves in these centres are a sad symptom of today's throw away society. People decide that a dog is not what they now want, or it doesn't live up to their expectations, so they dispose of it.

### What do I need to consider when it comes to adopting a rescue dog?

People often don't consider that dogs, like children, need our time. So the first thing to consider when adopting any dog is whether you plan to make the dog a part of your family. Considering most families spend a lot of their time indoors, that would mean the dog as well. The dog doesn't necessarily have to sleep indoors or spend all of their time indoors, however if a family can't commit to having regular interaction with the dog while they are at home, then don't get a dog, rescue or otherwise. A dog is a pack animal and needs to be part of the pack. It is not just desirable for the dog, it is necessary. In the wild a lone wolf's (the dog's ancestor) first priority would be to find a pack, as it is very difficult to survive without one.

Now I wouldn't be surprised if some are disputing what was just written. Perhaps you have a dog, or had a dog, that was fine spending most of their time on their own in the backyard. I would contend that they are not fine with this arrangement, rather they accept it.

So why do some dogs accept long periods separated from the rest of the family while others don't? Personality. In a canine pack there is a hierarchical structure from the alpha, or leader, down to the omega. It is the personality of the canine that determines where they fall in the pack, some are natural leaders and others are not. Generally an easy going and accepting canine does not become leader, nor do they question or challenge the human pack or the arrangements they find themselves in. Being so accommodating this also means canines with this personality rarely end up in rescue centres. It is canine personalities that would be leader, or feel they need to take the role of leader, that end up in rescue centres. Taking on the role of leader in a human world they do not understand often leads to behaviours we humans see as "problems".

Rather than address the issues that may arise with a dog, it is sad that many choose to just get rid of the dog, often because they didn't have time for the



dog in the first place. It is a vicious cycle. Pounds or rescue centres are not told the “real” reason for the dog being surrendered. People generally won’t volunteer that their dog has behavioural issues, as they fear the dog won’t be accepted. Instead many lie to appease their guilt and ensure the rescue centre accepts the dog.

Alternatively, people who adopt a dog from a Rescue Centre think that it is the role of the centre to “screen” the dog and identify any issues. While many dogs are “assessed” by rescue centres, this is a largely fruitless exercise. Generally only extremely entrenched behavioural issues are found during this assessment. The whole area of “behavioural assessment” is an article in itself; so I will focus on what happens to dogs while they are in a shelter which makes an accurate assessment so difficult.

### **Why are many behavioural issues missed by rescue centres?**

When people adopt a dog, only to discover the dog has behavioural issues, they often blame the rescue centre. They believe the centre deliberately withheld telling them about the dog’s problems in order to secure an adoption. This is not the case. The real reason is that the centre is unaware of the behavioural issue. The dog will not display the behavioural issue in the centre that probably led to their surrender and which may reassert itself once they are adopted again.

Why? Because being at a rescue centre is not the same as being part of a pack. The behavioural issues dogs develop are a result of their interaction with their pack (family) and it is those or other behavioural issues that often arise when they return to a pack. In a rescue centre a dog is literally in a holding pattern until they can find another pack. Being without a pack is a stressful situation for all dogs. Not to mention the stress of being held in a small territory surrounded by many other unfamiliar dogs. Many dogs are simply trying to cope in this situation. Please note my purpose is not to criticise rescue centres for this environment, rather I am describing the impact this environment has on the dog.

When we are stressed we are not ourselves, and nor will the dog be while it is in the centre. The dog only becomes itself again when it finds another pack. This is why many dedicated people in rescue centres feel so frustrated at being blamed for not telling the adopting family “the truth” about the dog. They also feel frustrated when they have “rebound” dogs that show none of the behavioural issues at the centre they are accused of by the families who adopted them. As a Canine Behavioural Consultant this is the main reason I would only ever do a consultation in the family home with the family present, because this is the way to make the best possible assessment of the dog.



## **So how can I tell if the dog I want to adopt has behavioural issues?**

Bottom line: You can't. The only way to truly find out is to adopt the dog. I have adopted, or personally rescued, 4 dogs over the past five years. Each has had behavioural issues and between the 4 of them, I believe I have faced almost every canine behavioural problem there is. The beauty is every behavioural problem can be either be managed or resolved.

## **Is every rescue dog going to have problems?**

Interestingly when I adopted my first rescue dog, I was told by the person at the rescue centre I would face problems with my dog. "There are always problems" he warned. At that time however, with my rose coloured glasses on and my ego puffed with the idea of "saving a dog", I dismissed the idea. After all, I had owned dogs before. A couple of months later those words of warning came flooding back as I watched in horror as my rescue dog ferociously attacked another dog. I still have this dog and it was my quest to find a way to solve her "problems" that started me on my path to becoming a Canine Behavioural Consultant.

Not that you need to become a behavioural consultant to adopt a rescue dog. However it would certainly help to better understand canine behaviour before adopting a rescue dog, though this equally applies to owning any dog. My in my past experience in customer service their was a saying that goes: anyone can provide good service to the happy, easy going customers, however it is the challenging customers that will really test your service skills. And it is the rescue dog that will really test your canine leadership skills.

So sharpen your skills. The best place to start would be to read a book about it. I have shelves full of books about canine behaviour; however there is only one I recommend "The Dog Listener" by Jan Fennell. Jan has written a number of books on the subject which are all good, though I recommend you start with this one. Alternatively, for the time poor, she has also produced a DVD with the same title. If you cannot locate the book or DVD in stores, you can contact me via my website ([www.siriuscaninecare.com.au](http://www.siriuscaninecare.com.au)) to purchase them.

## **What is required to adopt a rescue dog?**

Congratulations if you have read this far into the article. If you haven't been turned off by the doom and gloom presented so far you are showing some of the characteristics needed to adopt a rescue dog. If you have kept reading because you have already adopted the dog and you feel you have no choice, congratulations as well! Because you do have a choice and the fact that you want to develop a better relationship with your rescue dog deserves commending.



So the next important thing to consider when it comes to adopting a rescue dog is: are you prepared to make a lifetime commitment to this dog? Whether it was a valid reason or not that the dog ended up in the rescue centre, it doesn't matter to the dog. All they can comprehend is that they lost their family and they don't know why. No dog should have to go through that loss more than once. While people may occasionally (or often) wish they could find someone to take their children off their hands, they know it is not an option. Consider owning a dog in the same way. They are an addition to your family and need to be seen as such.

### **So why adopt a rescue dog?**

While each of my 4 teachers (rescue dogs) has provided me with my greatest challenges as a dog owner, I will always prefer to take on a rescue dog because the rewards are even greater. The bond that you develop when you earn the love and respect of your dog is simply magic. The bond does not happen in an instant, it grows with patience and showing calm, clear and consistent communication with your dog.

Even though most of this article has centred on behavioural issues and the rescue dog, the most important point to reinforce is that any behavioural issue can be either managed or resolved. The saying that you can't teach "an old dog new tricks" could not be further from the truth. However there are still dog "experts" that tout this; the advice I got from one of those experts regarding my first rescue dog was to have her put down. Luckily I didn't take that advice.

Many traditional methods of dog training will also tell you that you need to dominate your dog physically and verbally for them to see you as leader. Not only is this incorrect, it is sometimes physically impossible, not to mention dangerous. One of the many dog trainers I consulted to help with my first two rescue dogs recommended that I alpha roll my dog; to show him who was boss. The dog was a Rottweiler! He was almost the same weight as me and physically far stronger. At least I could see the funny side to that one. Luckily I found a method that does not require force, aggression or physical domination, rather it achieves leadership through cooperation and mutual trust. I would like to share a few aspects of this method to help you with introducing your rescue dog into your home.

### **So how can I best introduce my rescue dog?**

Firstly I will stress below are only some of the elements of the canine language. For a more complete introduction to canine language either buy the Dog Listener Book or DVD or book a consultation with a qualified Dog Listener (you can find a link to qualified Dog Listeners throughout Australia on my website: [www.siriuscaninecare.com.au](http://www.siriuscaninecare.com.au)).

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## **1. A dog is a canine and not a furry human**

Firstly it is important to change the way you see your dog. We have a tendency to humanise dogs but they are not human and do not see the world the same way we do. Behavioural issues are not the dog trying to be difficult, vicious or defiant (all examples of how we humanise the dog and its behaviour). Behavioural issues (not caused by any medical issues) are the result of the dog trying to make the best sense it can of the human world and its life within a human pack. Despite the fact that dogs are very intelligent, they are not able to learn our language so we need to learn theirs.

## **2. Love and Attention on your Terms**

Lavishing attention on your newly adopted dog is one of the most common mistakes people make when adopting a rescue dog. I will put my hand up and admit I was guilty of this one with my first rescue dog. I wanted to “make up for the love and attention” she had been missing. Now you may be thinking I am contradicting myself here, as I said earlier that the dog needs to be with the family as much as possible. The dog needs to be physically present with the family; however that doesn’t mean affection, attention or playing with the dog the entire time. Even a pack member living in the wild, or on the streets in some countries, does not get that much attention from the pack. Most of the time the pack simply “hangs out” together.

Humans see it as loving when a friend, family member, or our dog initiates affection. To us, it is their way of showing that they love us. Dogs see it differently. If a dog initiates affection, attention or play and you oblige them, you are paying homage to the dog in their eyes. Their pack mentality is not liberal or democratic, it is all about hierarchy. A dog that gets affection on their terms sees themselves as higher in the pack, and as such is responsible for the humans that worship them. This is the starting point for many behavioural issues.

I am not saying you cannot be affectionate to your dog; however the affection needs to be on your terms and not the dogs. The easiest way to know whether the affection is on your terms is to ask: who initiated the affection? If the affection was not initiated by you, then do not give affection to your dog. Dogs will try many ways to get affection on their terms, some tug at the heart strings, others are more demanding. Do not submit.

If your dog is demanding your attention, ignore them. If they become insistent, gently push them away without giving them any attention. They will get the message. Then once the dog has left you alone, you can then call them to you for affection. That is affection on your terms. If you go to the dog for affection this also compromises your position in their eyes. Like a king or queen on a throne, an alpha never approaches another pack member; they



invite the other dog to come to them. And when affection is on your terms the sky is the limit as to how much you want to fuss and cuddle your dog.

If you are wondering how long you need to ensure affection is on your terms: the simple answer is always. Some may be thinking that ignoring the dog is rude. However this is again seeing behaviour from a human rather than a canine perspective. Recently I adopted another rescue dog. My girl dog (my first rescue) sees herself as the highest ranking canine in our pack. She showed her position to the newcomer by completely ignoring him, which she did for a number of weeks. She is a Staffy cross and he is an Irish Wolfhound cross, so ignoring is not easy to do when he is twice the size. Each time he would walk up to her and sniff her, she would walk away without looking. She would also turn her head away to avoid his kisses. Even now, if there is any affection or play between them, it is always initiated by her. If he tries to initiate, she will ignore him. As a result when my dogs have free run on our property, you will always see a Staffy deciding where they go, with the Irish Wolf hound and the Cattle dog following unquestioningly behind. Please note also that she was able to communicate her position to him without force or aggression.

### **3. Give your dog the Space to Settle in**

In the early days (or weeks) of the dog joining your pack, while you allow them to be part of the family, it is best to keep interaction with them (even on your terms) to a minimum to help ease them into their new pack. Just go about your daily life and the dog will soon see where they fit. As they settle you can increase the interaction and then progress on to play (again on your terms). Just be patient and take things at the dog's pace.

### **4. Establish Leadership at each Reunion.**

Every time we reunite with our dog we communicate our position in the pack. This is the equivalent of the pack returning from the hunt. Not all pack members go on the hunt, and considering the dangers, not all pack members return from the hunt. So at each reunion there is a checking process for the dog to see where they fit within the pack. You know that you go to work and return home at the end of the day; however your dog does not.

So each time you reunite with your dog, they are going to check where they are positioned within the pack. Each physical separation, no matter how small, is a reunion for the dog, even just going to the toilet. Which is why they can be as excited when you return from the toilet as when you return home from work.

At any reunion the alpha signals their leadership status by ignoring all the pack members. Despite the greeting by the other dogs, the alpha will simply walk past the other pack members and find a position at a distance from the



rest of the pack. Once the pack has settled, the alpha may invite other dogs to them, if they choose to do so.

To communicate your leadership to your dog, you need to do the same thing at every reunion. Ignore the dog, which means no looking at, no talking to or no patting the dog. When the dog leaves you alone (this settling period may take a while to begin with) then allow the dog to relax for a few minutes. When they are calm, invite the dog to you for affection. As time goes on and the dog begins to accept your leadership, the period of settling and then inviting will get shorter, however initially use about 5 mins as a guide (that is 5 mins from when the dog leaves you alone to when you invite the dog to you).

Again this may be something that people don't want to hear as they like the fact that their dog is "excited" when they get home; often it is one of the reasons why people get a dog. From a canine point of view, if the dog sees itself as above you in the pack (because you worship them as soon as you walk in the door) then they are responsible for you as your leader. The problem for your dog is that you are not an easy pack member to look after because you disappear (got to work etc) and they have no idea where you have gone or if you are coming back, no matter how many times you leave.

This is the canine equivalent of a parent having a small child wander off. This is stressful for your dog and one of the main causes of separation anxiety. An overly "excited" dog on your return is a dog that has been stressed by the absence of their baby. Do you want your dog stressed every time you leave, just so you can feel "loved" when you come home? Once you establish your leadership role with your dog, they will still greet you; however it is a calm greeting from a dog that has probably spent the absence asleep, as only a calm and relaxed dog can.

## **5. Be a Benevolent Leader for your Dog**

Your dog lives in a world it doesn't understand. This is one of the main reasons why it is important to establish leadership with your dog. The alpha decides when to leave to go on the hunt and who will go with them. Pack members left behind understand this. Establishing your leadership role with your dog takes away the stress they feel by trying to lead a pack that they can't control, in situations that they don't understand. A dog relieved of the role of leader can just be a dog, and there is nothing more beautiful.

Please note these techniques described apply to all dogs, not just rescue dogs, after all this is their language. There are other critical times where we communicate we are the decision maker or leader. This article has mentioned just a few. Following these steps will create a smoother introduction for you and your new pack member.



## **Does this mean by following these tips you won't have any problems with your rescue dog?**

No, life never offers guarantees. There is no such thing as the perfect dog, even one you raise from a puppy. Lassie, the icon of the perfect dog, was in fact three dogs, so they could substitute dogs when one wouldn't cooperate during filming. Just like us, dogs have their endearing and not so endearing aspects of their personality.

Hopefully you will now understand that every canine problem can be managed or resolved. Removing their stress by relieving them of the role of leadership also removes the underlying cause for most behavioural problems (i.e. those not due to a medical issue). If you are still having problems with your dog after having implemented these steps, there may be other aspects of the canine language you need to introduce. If you have read the book or watched the DVD "The Dog Listener" and you believe all members of the household are communicating consistently with the dog in this way, then perhaps you need a Consultant to help you further refine your canine communication skills. To locate a qualified Dog Listener please see the links page on my website.

For me the joy of seeing the stress melt away from a rescue dog is the most rewarding and precious gift, both for the dog and for myself. The love, trust and mutual respect you have with your dog when they elect you as their leader is a relationship that far exceeds anything that can be achieved through force or dominance. And here I speak from experience, because trudged down the traditional path before I found there is a better way.

When you think of leadership, what leadership style inspires you? An authoritarian 'do as I command' leader or benevolent "why don't we try it this way" leader? Who would you trust and respect more? Why would it be any different for your dog?