



I Need to Return this Dog ...

For many of us, those are words we'd never say. And yet, they are said to shelters and rescue groups on a daily basis. We wanted to explore this issue from a dog behavior perspective. Specifically, the behavior related reasons for dog returns we've seen over and over throughout the years. While there are behavior challenges that make a dog genuinely incompatible with a given home (addressed later in the post), many of the most common behavior related reasons for returning an adopted dog are not just fixable, but sometimes could be avoided in the first place with the right supportive strategies in place.

The Transition Period

You load your newly adopted pup into the car and bring them home from the shelter (or foster home). You know right away that you are this dog's person and that they are home to stay. The dog, on the other hand, has no idea. You are just the latest person to change their routine and shake up their sense of stability and security. They don't know they get to stay with you and they are very likely stressing out and, possibly even acting out. The less stability this dog had before coming home with you, the more true this is.

So how do you tell your newly adopted best friend that they are safe and loved and that this is their home? **You show them through your actions.** Your dog's first 30ish days in your home should be filled with routine, consistency, clear boundaries, and an abundance of patience. The more consistent you are, the more quickly your dog will begin to settle in as an integrated part of your life and the more quickly you will be able to ease up on some of the stricter parts of the routine.



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We can't expect our dogs to know how to behave unless we show them and we must be willing to see the adoption from the perspective of our new best friend. Fortunately, there are an abundance of **existing programs** to support you through the transition period, as well as help available from professional trainers and, often, the organization through which you adopted.

Cute Puppy Becomes a Naughty Teenager

This accounts for a near constant stream of dogs arriving at shelters. First, anyone familiar with what pre-teen and teenage humans are like should not be surprised that adolescent dogs can be a handful. All those hilarious stories of that crazy, ridiculous thing someone's dog did? There is a good chance they did it between the ages of 6 months to 3 years. Adolescent dogs are notorious for a lack of self-control and are bursting with a mix of energy, curiosity, and hormones that can make them seem like wild beasts without the right support in place.

So, what to do with puppies to keep that naughtiness to a minimum and what to do with adolescent dogs to keep you from pulling your hair out? For puppies, training and socialization are a MUST. It's non-negotiable. Keeping your puppy sheltered will result in poor socialization that can show up as more serious behavior problems later in life. Not providing consistent boundaries and expectations or providing your puppy with training will only ensure that they'll tear into adolescence with the verve of an Amish kid on rumspringa. Those behaviors that are kind of cute at 20lbs cease to be so at 60lbs.

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There are a plethora of available **puppy socialization classes**, as well as **excellent books** on getting your puppy started on the right paw. And as for that adolescent dog, this is the perfect time to really develop your relationship with your best friend. Get busy. Invest in **puzzle toys**, sign up for a **fun class or extracurricular activity** with your dog like group training, agility, group hiking, nose work, or a good old basics class. Hit the backyard for a game of fetch.

Most importantly, remember to keep your sense of humor and to reach out for help when you need it.

Reactivity

“I love my dog but every time I try to take him for a walk, he goes crazy. He barks at other dogs/stray cats/bicycles/strollers/joggers/people in hats/cars/you name it. I wanted a dog I could go running with so, sorry, but I’m bringing him back to the shelter.”

This is an incredibly common problem and affects shelter dogs to such a degree partly because shelters can be such a huge CAUSE of reactivity. Dogs housed in kennels all day, watching other dogs and people pass in front of them, are living in a perfect set up for a condition called **barrier frustration** (also common in backyard dogs). What often happens is the barrier frustration transfers to the leash, manifesting as reactivity. Other common factors in causing reactivity are fear, lack of socialization, and unintentional reinforcing of the behavior by the handler.



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Reactivity is just as treatable as it is common. There are training classes specifically on the subject, [helpful books](#), [excellent training programs](#), and even [supportive communities for owners](#) of reactive dogs. [We have written an expansive blog post on how to help dogs with this specific challenge](#). Is it embarrassing to have your dog go gremlin during your neighborhood walk? Sure. But working through that reactivity is a gift you can give your dog and a merit badge earned by many a dog lover and pet parent.

Separation Anxiety

Have you seen the dogshaming.com photos of dogs destroying things while their owner was out? The cute rottie mix stuck in the blinds with the caption, “Thank goodness you’re home! I thought you were never, ever, ever, ever coming back again ever.” That is separation anxiety (not to be confused with the bored dog who chews your shoes or the corner of your couch). You leave and your dog panics. They destroy things, attempt to escape (or actually do escape), and sometimes even hurt themselves as well as your stuff. In extreme cases, we’ve known dogs who chewed all the way through drywall, busted free from metal crates and through glass windows, climbed out on rooftops, and howled so excessively their adopters were threatened with eviction.

Your best bet for handling separation anxiety is a [clear and effective plan](#) and a good understanding of what is happening and why. In the case of extreme separation anxiety, help from a professional trainer is recommended. Also helpful are a positive approach to [crate training](#), calming aids like [Through a Dog’s Ear](#), [DAP or Rescue Remedy](#), the use of [TTouch](#), and providing your dog with consistency and stability, particularly important during the previously mentioned transition period following adoption. Dogs



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with separation anxiety also benefit from calm greeting and departure behavior on the part of their guardian.

Not Getting Along with Other Pets

Depending on the circumstances, this can be a problem that is fixable or a problem that genuinely warrants a return. The DOL crew is well versed in dogs who are difficult to integrate with other pets, and yet every single one of our dogs shares his or her home with canine (and sometimes feline) siblings and has shared that home with foster siblings as well. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

1. *Getting along with other dogs (or cats) in one situation does not necessarily transfer to all others.* Dog passed its cat test at the shelter? Had a blast in play group? Was kenneled with a canine buddy? Great! This means that dog CAN get along with others but not that he/she automatically will in every situation.
2. *Do not just toss 'em together and see what happens.* Your existing pets and your new dog all deserve to have their needs, space, and boundaries respected and to be set up for success. There are a variety of frameworks for integration and what every single one has in common is that they take time and require some structure at the outset.
3. *A fight does not mean failure.* If a dog does serious damage in a fight, professional intervention is no longer optional but becomes a must. However, most fights are just a lot of noise. They sound scary. They look scary. But they do not mean the animals involved cannot coexist or that either one is “bad,” “dangerous,” or



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“aggressive.” Dog fights, mild scuffles in particular, are relatively common in the world of dog interactions.

4. *Meet and greets are your friend, but not the holy grail.* We highly recommend meet & greets for existing pets and will require them for DOL dogs. They are an invaluable indicator for success, but a meet & greet cannot and does not predict exactly what will happen between the animals post adoption.
5. *It's in the details.* Though we may not understand what has happened, a fight or an incident never occur without reason and rarely occur without warning. This is one of the reasons professional help is so important. Helping your new pets get along is much easier when you can identify triggers and sources of stress or discord.

[An excellent article that goes into more depth on the subject can be found here.](#)

Not Getting Along with the Kids

As behavioral reasons for returns go, this one has the least wiggle room. If a dog is truly a danger to a child, it needs to find an adult-only home or perhaps a home with older children. Some dogs are simply uncomfortable with children; their fast movements and high activity level can seem scary. It could be partly lack of socialization but it is alright, and not abnormal, for a dog to prefer an adult-only home.

Another commonly seen side of the issue is dogs held to a higher (and often grossly unfair) behavior standard than children. Dogs and children can be a great and



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very special combination. If an animal is brought into a home with children, it can be a wonderful opportunity for the children to develop their sense of empathy, responsibility, and to form a bond that lasts a lifetime.

However, at no time should children tormenting a dog be disregarded as “kids being kids” or acceptable behavior. It is inhumane and it is dangerous. A dog defending itself from being chased, cornered, frightened, or hurt (tail pulling, ear tugging, and worse) is a disaster waiting to happen. A child ends up bitten and a dog often pays with their life.

When bringing a pet into a home with children, the responsibility falls on the adults in the household to **know what appropriate interaction looks like from both the dog and from the child** and be able to facilitate that interaction. In this case, knowing really is half the battle and can make all the difference between a frightening and heartbreaking outcome and a companionship with positive lessons and memories that last forever.

The Basics

We've talked about some of the common behavior reasons for returning adopted dogs that require a bit of knowledge and support. But dogs get sent back for the basics, too! If you are considering returning an adopted dog for **going to the bathroom in the house, pulling on the leash, stealing snacks from the counter, jumping up on guests, chewing on your shoes, not coming when they're called**, or drinking out of the toilet... STOP! This is the easy stuff!

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We don't mean to trivialize these as behaviors you just shouldn't worry about but they are common, simple to fix dog issues that a basic training class, in-home training session, or simple pre-existing training plan can help get corrected in a snap! A little time, patience, and training fun and you and your flip-flop fetishist can be on the road to happily ever after.

The bottom line is this ...

Adopting a dog means making a commitment to your new family member. Dogs are not robots. Much like us, they have thoughts, feelings, quirks, and bad habits. There will be ups and downs and there will be challenges but there is nothing else in life like having a true canine companion. If you take the time to really become your dog's best friend, you will never regret it. Anyone who has truly loved a dog already knows this and has stories to tell of their mutual journey that can make you laugh, cry, widen your eyes, and feel inspired.

Interested in learning more? Experiencing one of the above with your own adopted dog? Check out our [online resource library](#) or email us at info@dogsoutloud.org.

Trying to choose a trainer but not sure what to look for? [Here is an excellent guide](#).

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List of links:

Bringing Home a New Dog:

<http://www.dogsoutloud.org/2013/05/so-youve-brought-home-a-new-dog-now-what/>
<http://www.patriciamccconnell.com/store/Love-Has-No-Age-Limit.html>
<http://dogsoutloud.org/behavior-resources/behavior-library/>

Socialization and Enrichment:

<http://www.zoomroomonline.com/austin-dog-training.html>
<http://www.dogwise.com/search.cfm>
<http://www.firecrackerdog.com/store>
<http://morefunthandirt.com/classes/schedule/>

Reactivity:

<http://www.dogsoutloud.org/2013/03/leash-gremlins-need-love-too/>
http://www.maddiesfund.org/Resource_Library/Behavior_Problems_and_Long_Term_Housing.html
<http://www.dogwise.com/itemdetails.cfm?ID=dtb766>
<http://functionalrewards.com/>
<http://dogsinneedofspace.com/>

Separation Anxiety:

<http://www.amazon.com/Leave-Step-Step-Separation-Anxiety/dp/0981722733>

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Separation Anxiety, con't.:

<https://docs.google.com/a/dogsoutloud.org/document/d/1U-xoH3qACQriK1RTCL3pKsT3JkjB0AgxsuphIdjEBE/edit>

<http://throughadogsear.com/>

<http://www.drsfostersmith.com/dog-supplies/calming-aids/ps/c/3307/21347?ref=3928&subref=AA&cmpid=PPC-G-3928>

<http://www.ttouch.com/>

Not Getting Along with Other Pets:

http://www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/13_4/features/Dog-Fighting-Behavior-Aggression_16214-1.html

Not Getting Along with the Kids:

<http://drsophiayin.com/blog/entry/kids-and-dogs-how-kids-should-and-should-not-interact-with-dogs>

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https://docs.google.com/a/dogsoutloud.org/document/d/14--g8IL5bFMGIxMBuLzquFYmHNW54c9e_MxAVtmWwfQ/edit

https://docs.google.com/a/dogsoutloud.org/document/d/199_8gtlTWuAcOQCWRgPvajK4kXiTTbQPIz5DcSrFYZ8/edit

<https://docs.google.com/a/dogsoutloud.org/document/d/1aKmrtdQ65nPiSBeIObpSXyRDSIWnqhXQYTZ4NHTBaZ4/edit>

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The Basics, con't:

<https://docs.google.com/a/dogsoutloud.org/document/d/1GkllH-QC9AHP6tSpfJ3h4JUbxmrKmOIggOyg8sl4Sk/edit>

https://docs.google.com/a/dogsoutloud.org/document/d/1DDN7Jgg4aZ4HMUrhiZiv1v2IUTyndYLWQ5W_cA0TFUs/edit

http://www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/11_12/features/Teaching-a-Reliable-Recall_16085-1.html

Choosing a Trainer:

<http://www.patriciamcconnell.com/theotherendoftheleash/who-should-treat-behavior-problems-in-dogs-cats>

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