



## 5 Common Mistakes adopters make when bringing home a new dog

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Everyone knows that adopting a dog from a shelter saves animals' lives and makes us all feel good. At any time of year, but especially around the holidays, social media feeds are packed with heartwarming stories of shelters adopting out large numbers of dogs to their forever homes. It is feel-good central and we eat it up.

What people don't talk about as much, however, is what the first few weeks at home with a new dog are like, particularly if it's difficult. And even less talked about is the fact that many dogs are returned to shelters within just a few weeks. Some statistics say as many as 20%. Why is this? How can things go from happy to - pardon our French - crappy so quickly?

We, the trainers at The Local Bark, have a few thoughts about this. We did, after all, recently select four dogs from Sacramento County Animal Shelter to foster, train, and place in forever homes. And even though we're professional trainers and this should all be easy-peasy-lemon-squeezy, we were reminded at how easy it would be to fall prey to the common mistakes well-meaning adopters make when bringing home a new dog. Keep reading, because these mistakes are NOT what you think.

We selected **Olaf, Elsa, Crystal and Snow** using the same criteria any potential adopter might use: 1) they appeared to like people and other dogs (no obvious signs of aggression), 2) Olaf is

a pure-bred German shepherd (highly desirable + handsome), 3) Elsa is a snuggly pit bull (we love pit bulls and there are so many homeless ones) and 4) Crystal and Snow are adorable small dogs (great companions and not too barky). Done, done, and done.

Here's where we all walk out of the shelter and into the sunset, our hearts full, ready to give these dogs the lives they deserve. It's what we've been waiting for! And it is what we do next that will determine if the integration of these dogs into a family-type setting goes smoothly, or if it goes, well, to the dogs.

### Elsa

First, let's take a look at Elsa, the kissable 8-month-old pit bull who went home with trainer Jaclynn. As soon as they walked in the door, Elsa happily trotted over to the couch, hopped on, and looked about as at-home as you could imagine. Jaclynn said if Elsa had thumbs she probably would have grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. It would have been easy for Jaclynn to just leave Elsa there with that precious face and all.

*After all, a dog fresh out of the shelter needs the comforts of a couch to feel welcome, right?* Wrong. Hello **Common Mistake #1**.

The last thing Elsa needs is a plethora of choices in the furniture department. Elsa needs direction. What starts out as self-inviting to the couch can lead to other pushy and undesirable behaviors like jumping on people, becoming "guardy" of valuable spaces like couches or beds, and more. Remember

we don't know anything about Elsa's true behavior and tendencies. And we won't for quite a few weeks.

**Remedy?** Jaclynn (who hadn't yet taken the leash off Elsa...more on that in a minute...) simply and quietly led Elsa off the couch. When Elsa tried to jump up again, Jaclynn repeated the calm removal, this time leading Elsa to her bed. When Elsa stepped onto her bed, Jaclynn said "good girl!" and gave her a treat and lots of kisses. And remember, Elsa – not being human – doesn't get hurt feelings that she's being relegated to a bed made especially for her on the floor. She was just happy to get kisses.

The reason Jaclynn was able to calmly show Elsa what she wanted from her was because Elsa was wearing a leash.

That brings us to **Common Mistake #2: a dog coming from the cooped-up confines of the shelter needs freedom and free reign to "get to know" her new home, right? Nope.**

Elsa needs boundaries. Too much freedom can be overwhelming to new dogs. And you know what dogs tend to do when they're overwhelmed in a new environment?

**Pee.** Even the housebroken ones will have accidents. They pee to mark new territory; because they're scared; because they don't know what else they're supposed to do. It's our duty to make sure we've set up an environment where a new dog can't make a mistake, like chew the computer cord or the arm of the couch, for example. Inconsistent and unclear boundaries encourage all kinds of unwanted behaviors and other problems that keep us trainers employed. Not to mention the overwhelming-ness of a brand new environment and all those new sights, sounds and smells can cause a lot of dogs to go into a very reserved mode, often leading new adopters to believe they've hit the jackpot and brought home the mellowest dog in the shelter. (More about this phenomenon in "Snow" below.)

So, the ideal set-up is a centrally located room, like the kitchen or family room, blocked off with a gate, with a nice dog bed and a crate. **Crates are wonderful tools.** They appeal to a dog's nesting instinct. Most dogs quickly learn that a crate with a nice comfy bed inside is a safe place to rest. (If you think your dog has a strong aversion to a crate because she appears extremely stressed at the sight of it, call a dog behavior professional. Don't abandon the crate as an option too quickly).

When you have to leave the dog alone for short periods of time, which you will, **the crate is the safest place.** Nobody gets into trouble. When you have to leave for long periods of time, like to go to work, you'll need to make sure the dog has a reasonably sized space, like a room that doesn't contain a bunch of tempting-but-forbidden items that might get chewed on or a bit larger crate, large enough for them to get up, turn around and stand. When you're home and supervising your dog, make sure she drags a leash so you can lead her outside for potty and remind her to stay off the couch.

Plan on employing these boundaries for several weeks at least, Jaclynn said it was a month before she let Elsa have any free access to the house, and even then Jaclynn would call her when she went out of sight.

## Snow

Snow, a perky little small-dog mix, went home with The Local Bark's agility trainer Amanda. Amanda has a zillion dogs, mostly border collies, and because of this has to enforce rules of structure and boundaries, and she already has the ideal set-up in her home.

Where it would have been easy for Amanda to make a Common Mistake with Snow is in the area of exercise. Snow was the perfect example of the "jackpot" pup - mellow and accommodating – when she first got home to Amanda's.

As mentioned earlier, some dogs go through a "honeymoon" period where they are not their usual

energetic selves. They are processing all kinds of new information, which is exhausting. This leads many new adopters to believe their new dog just doesn't require much exercise, which brings us to...

**Common Mistake #3:** *not starting and keeping up some kind of daily exercise routine with your new dog.*

One thing that makes combating...**Common Mistake #2** (enforcing boundaries) a little easier is a regular exercise routine. Exercise and mental stimulation encourage relaxation, and a relaxed dog is a dog that's easier to manage indoors. Unless you brought home a high-energy working dog (have treadmill?), "exercise" doesn't require you take up running. One of the most pleasurable things you can do with your new dog is to allow her to safely explore at the end of a long-line (a 20+-foot cotton training lead found at your local pet store). Bring treats and reward your dog when she looks at you. Praise her heartily when she walks toward you. Start bonding by working together. Combine this activity with a 30-minute leash walk and you'll most likely be meeting your new dog's exercise needs. At least you'll be getting a sense of what those needs might be. And keep it up, even when the novelty of walking your new dog wears off...which it will... especially when it's cold outside.

Amanda can't resist training a "blank slate" and she had Snow doing all kinds of "work" within a few days. She said Snow was actually really smart and loved to learn - not just obedience commands but fun tricks as well. Many people don't think of small dogs as requiring mental stimulation, like they get with basic training, but they definitely do. Otherwise they can turn into little monsters...

Which brings us to Crystal --- **Common Mistake #3.**

## Crystal

Trainer Chris had the pleasure of bringing home adorable Chihuahua, Crystal. According to Chris, Crystal clearly saw herself as queen of everything.

And boss of everyone. Someone had made a few Common Mistakes with Crystal, particularly

**Common Mistake #4:** *Allowing free access to possessions, aka "spoiling" with lots of high-value toys and treats with no rules about access to them.*  
**Big mistake.**

This is one of the most serious problems we trainers deal with in our small-dog clients: resource or possession guarding. Many new adopters feel like the quickest way to their new dog's heart is through "stuff". This includes access to high-value places, like the couch, or your lap, with no rules.

Chris has other dogs, and right away Crystal went into queen mode, claiming all kinds of possessions around the house. Chris said she hadn't been home 30 minutes and was in the process of figuring out spaces for confinement (boundaries) and finding an appropriate collar and leash for 5-pound Crystal to drag around before Queen Crystal settled herself on the end of the couch and proceeded to "defend" her space as the other dogs approached to say hello. Where this really gets tricky is if a dog will defend spaces and possessions not just from other dogs, but from people.

Remedy: Chris set Crystal up in a nice big pen (boundaries) and immediately started "trading" with her. She would approach Crystal with a treat, say "take it" then give her the treat, establishing herself as the human Pez Dispenser of goodness. This got Crystal's attention. Then, after repeating that a few times, Chris gave Crystal a toy and then "traded" the toy for the treat. This reinforced the concept that Chris represented giving things, not just taking them away. This is a great exercise but it must be practiced in tandem with boundaries and structure. Crystal cannot have free access to the couch, nor be given a high-value treat like a bone, until it has been established that she will give it up without defending it. And this takes time...usually weeks. She can't sit like a queen on a lap and be allowed to tell the other dogs to "go away". Our laps and the personal space around our bodies must also be treated as a high-value resource to a dog.

That takes us to everybody's favorite foster dog, Olaf and **Common Mistake #5**.

## Olaf

Olaf was the young German shepherd that presented himself at the shelter as super shy and subdued. He went home with the boss. That's Kristin, owner of The Local Bark. Three days in, when asked how he was doing, Kristin said "he's lucky he's cute, and he's lucky I love shepherds, because he's driving me crazy." Uh oh.

**Common mistake #5:** "Spoiling" aka allowing invasion of personal space and excessive affection. A dog from the shelter likely had a horrible, abusive life and needs love and affection to flourish, correct? **Negative.**

Olaf was driving Kristin crazy because he attached himself to her hip. She couldn't move without him tripping her. He didn't "know" how to NOT try and become one with whoever was closest to him. And it was not coming from a happy place. It was coming from a place of insecurity and fear. He crowded her other dogs as well, although dogs have a great knack at quickly teaching each other what line not to cross when it comes to their personal space. They're way better at it than we are because we give mixed signals. We allow them to "snuggle" on us, invade our personal space, follow us into the bathroom, all uninvited. Then we get irritated when

we trip over them in the kitchen. Well-meaning new adopters mistakenly think they're offering security to their new dog when they're really nurturing unbalanced and anxious behavior. First step on the road to separation anxiety...OR a launch on the path to guarding the human as a valuable resource.

One of the most endearing things about Olaf is that he loves being hugged by Kristin's young children. But Kristin couldn't allow ANY of this for the first few weeks because she needed Olaf to become confident standing on his own, and he needed to become aware of his size and the personal space requirements of the children, adults and other dogs around him.

Olaf needed to be a normal dog with structure and boundaries. Kristin set up a comfy space for Olaf in her garage where her other dogs spend time when not being supervised in the house. Everyone gets a crate, a comfy bed, stuff to do, and outdoor access to potty. This is an ideal dog set-up. When in the house, Kristin used a tie-down to safely tether Olaf to an area where he could lay on a dog bed, chew on a bone, and just hang out and watch. By ignoring him, except to occasionally praise him for lying quietly, Olaf had the opportunity to simply observe. Kristin could bring in her other dogs, send them to their beds, and Olaf got to see how a people-centered and dog-friendly household runs.

**Let's review.** Most of the common mistakes well-meaning adopters make when bringing home their new dogs have to do with lack of boundaries and structure. We cannot stress the importance of starting your relationship with your new dog with these things in mind. It takes a few months to start getting to know a new dog. Put in the management up front to avoid the pitfalls that lead to so many dogs being returned to the shelter.