

THE OTHER END OF THE LEASH

Three Ways to Confuse a New Dog

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“Three days, three weeks, three months.” That’s the mantra of many dog trainers and behaviorists, when welcoming a new dog into their household. The “magic of threes” is especially relevant when adopting an adolescent or adult dog into your home. Dogs, especially non-puppies, are often in a bit of shock for the first three days in a new home, and don’t show you too much about who they are until they’ve been there a few days. After three weeks many dogs have settled in such that they behave as though they feel like they are “home” now, but don’t fit into your routine until about three months have gone by. The number three has another relevance to new dogs: See below for the three ways we most confuse new dogs, and how to prevent it.

The exact same thing happened with our Cavalier, Tootsie, when we adopted her a few years ago. Tootsie, having been rescued from a puppy mill, had little idea about where to potty, to come when called, or to do much of anything on cue. I think it took a full year for her to totally settle in (I think it takes most dogs at least that long) but the three-month marker was a big one for us.

In celebration of the magic of threes, here are three biggest mistakes people make when adopting an adolescent or adult dog:

One: “Oh, good, he’s house trained.” Not in your house he isn’t! Dogs don’t necessarily generalize from one place to another until they’ve had a lot of experience in different places, so treat your three-year old dog like a puppy for the first few weeks. That took three weeks with Maggie and three months with Tootsie, who learned to potty where she ate and slept while confined to a cage in a puppy mill.

Two: “We’ll have everyone over to socialize him!” (Variant: “We’ll take him to training class tomorrow night!”) Your new dog didn’t spend weeks or months deciding to move to a new place, so he or she is probably in a bit of shock. New dogs need quiet time to adjust to their new surroundings, so go easy on the visitors or the new experiences for awhile. Remember that your new house is as big a “new experience” as is possible.

Three: “Oh No! We’ve had him two weeks already and now there’s a behavioral problem!” It’s true that some behavioral problems are so serious that they can’t be treated, but it is much (MUCH) more common that whatever is going on will be resolved with some simple training, patience, and yes, faith. I know well what it feels like to have “adopter’s remorse,” even with my background there have been moments I asked myself what the heck I was thinking after Tootsie and Maggie came. But all dogs, just like all people, need time and good coaching to be the best they can be. Most problems are fixable, so it’s okay to take a breath and think through the solution. Most importantly: Think long term, as in, it is going to take three months for my new dog to begin to settle in, and a full year for that to happen completely.

What about you? What has been your experience when bringing an older dog into your home? FYI, if you’d like to read more, go to the [Adoption page in the Reading Room](#) on my website.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patricia B. McConnell, PhD, CAAB is an applied animal behaviorist who has been working with, studying, and writing about dogs for over twenty-five years. She encourages your participation, believing that your voice adds greatly to its value. She enjoys reading every comment, and adds her own responses when she can.