

The Newly Adopted Dog and the Runaway Syndrome from www.maxfund.org

The scenario: You adopt a dog and bring him home, with high hopes for a great life together. You've seen the "homecoming" memes on social media: there's the dog with her head on your shoulder as you drive home, both of you smiling as you contemplate your happy future together. Or the dog is snuggled in his brand new bed, a look of contentment and relief on his face. "Aah. I'm home!"

But the reality may not be so meme-worthy. Your first few days may be no honeymoon. You may observe concerning behaviors like fear, inappropriate potty habits, or separation anxiety. Or you just don't seem to be "bonding." Or perhaps the dog has tried to run away (or worse, succeeded). After a frustrating 48 hours, you give him up and bring him back to MaxFund. You're dismayed. We're dismayed. The dog's dismayed. What happened?

It's not uncommon for a newly adopted dog to run away during her first hours, days, or weeks in a new home. This has happened with a number of newly-adopted MaxFund dogs. This can also happen in a fostering situation, or even an overnight visit. This phenomenon occurs frequently enough that it deserves a name: we'll call it the Runaway Syndrome. Why does this happen, and what can be done about it? (Note: This issue deals only with the "Runaway Syndrome." But of course, there can be other issues involved in the transition from shelter to home. These issues include introducing the dog to other pets, ensuring a kid-safe and dog-safe experience if you have younger children, identifying and reducing household hazards, potty-training, behavior issues, and many others. MaxFund is always happy to help new adopters in dealing with such issues. We want the transition from "shelter dog" to "your beloved forever companion" to be successful and as stress-free as possible!)

What you think and what the dog thinks about "homecoming" may be two different things.

From a human-centric standpoint, we think that a dog should be delighted to be out of the shelter and in the lovely home of his forever family. Now, the dog has his own comfy bed, furniture to loll on, yummy food, fun toys, loving attention, and maybe even a luxurious backyard to romp in! What's not to love?

But it's important to look at this change in circumstances from the dog's standpoint. As far as the dog is concerned, this new place is not "home"! "Home" is where he's been sleeping and eating for the past days, weeks, or months. In other words, the animal shelter is "home"; this new place is scary, unfamiliar, and decidedly not "home." The dog's impulse may be to run away and get back home...to the shelter! So give the dog some time to become acclimated, and take special precautions until this happens. This may take days, weeks, or even months. But by planning for this initial period of uncertainty, and guarding against the escape risks, you can give your new dog a safe introduction to what surely will be a great forever homecoming.

Your door is the dog's way out!

It's critical, during the period when the Runaway Syndrome may be in effect, to take special precautions to ensure the dog doesn't escape. Even the act of opening your door may give the dog a chance to run away. Some MaxFund dogs have escaped during their first hour at home when the front door was opened. So make sure everyone in the family is extra-careful to ensure, when opening the door, that the dog isn't in a position to squeeze through and take off.

Also, think about who else may have key access to your home. If you have a friend or service provider with such access, then the risk of escape is heightened. They may not exercise the same degree of care that you would, or just be caught unawares. We recently heard about the tragedy of a dog who escaped when a friend let herself in while the dog's new human was out on a quick errand. The dog was hit by a car and died. This happened within two hours of the dog's arrival home. You can avoid such a tragedy by contacting everyone who has key access, and asking them not to let themselves in while you're not home, until you say otherwise. If access is via a passcode, change the passcode to prevent access until the Runaway Syndrome is over.

Your backyard is not as secure as you think.

Inspect your backyard before bringing a dog home, and don't ever leave the dog unattended in the backyard. An agile dog may be able to jump any fence lower than 6 feet, and some dogs can jump even higher fences (especially if waste receptacles or other items can be used as "steps"). Dogs can easily dig their way out from under a fence, and some dogs have an instinct for finding a loose or broken fence slat.

Chain link fences can be climbed easily, and some gate latches are no match for a smart dog.

Assume that your new dog is going to be smarter than you are about finding an escape route from your backyard! This doesn't mean the backyard has to be off limits. It just means that you can never take your eyes off the dog while you are in the backyard together! Once the Runaway Syndrome has receded, you can be a bit more relaxed.

Walks can be extra hazardous.

Be very careful on walks. If a leash will be attached to the dog's collar, make sure the collar is tight enough that it won't slip off. Consider using a Martingale-style collar that tightens when the dog tries to pull, or a slip lead that tightens similarly. If using a harness, or a head collar (such as a Halti or Gentle Leader), use a back-up clip that attaches to the collar. Don't use a rigid handle leash (such as a Flexi) with a large dog, especially one who pulls. A traditional loop-handle leash is more likely to stay in your grasp, especially if you put your wrist all the way through the handle first before grasping the leash.

But keep in mind that no method of leashing a dog is foolproof. There's no substitute for paying close attention during walks, and reacting quickly if the dog assumes any posture that could mean slipping out of a collar, harness, or lead.

And don't even think about going to an off-leash park! An off-leash area may seem like a great amenity. But you don't know for sure how well-secured it is. You don't know how your dog will behave when meeting other dogs, and you don't know how other dogs will behave towards yours. You likely don't know for sure that your dog will come back to you reliably when called. All of these and other factors make off-leash parks too risky, especially for a new dog.

Tour the house, keep your dog close, and take frequent potty breaks. Take the dog on a tour when she arrives at her new home. Keep her on leash and walk around with her so that she can sniff and explore the house. You can gradually take the dog off the leash as she learns about house rules and boundaries. Reinforce potty-training during this time with frequent potty breaks, and praise your new dog lavishly for doing her "business" outside!

Stay home! If possible, you should remain at home with the dog as much as possible, at least during the first few days. One dog was adopted from MaxFund right before his new dad had to take a rare week-long trip away from home, and his new mom worked full-time. Although she went home every day at mid-day, she found that the poor dog was so anxious about being left alone that he tried to chew his way out of his new home (as attested by tooth marks on the drywall and door frames). After that unfortunate start, this good dog never showed any other signs of separation anxiety. So the lesson learned was that the humans should have been smarter about the timing of their absences following adoption!

Delay the parties! A similar lesson applies to having visitors (or worse, a party) to celebrate the dog's arrival! Keep the home situation stable and predictable for a while. Having a raucous party, or visitors popping in and out, can create additional stresses for the dog. Worse, your guests may not be as cautious as you when it comes to guarding the door, creating escape opportunities.

Shopping or other excursions? Maybe later! Limit trips for the dog to those that are absolutely necessary. For example, you might be inclined to take your new buddy shopping for new dog gear on his way home from the shelter. But think about all of the escape opportunities while getting in and out of your car, and while in a strange store, not to mention the stresses of all those strange people, things, and smells! Your dog will have a lot more fun going shopping if you hold off for a few weeks.

We humans know that stress can weaken our immune systems. The stresses of a new environment can have a similar impact on a dog's immune system, contributing to the possibility of a new or recurring illness. This is another good reason to limit the dog's excursions for a little while. All those new and unfamiliar destinations can add to both the dog's stress levels, and the possibility of picking up an unwanted bug!

Certainly, you don't want to delay needed veterinary attention. But if you're contemplating a routine vet visit, determine whether it can wait for a few days. That way, you'll give your new dog time to have full confidence in her new guardian...you! The vet visit can then be less stressful for everyone – you, your dog, and the vet!

A crate may be great! See if the shelter knows whether the dog has been crate-trained. A dog who's been properly introduced to the crate will view it as a relaxing haven, and you'll have the peace of mind of knowing that she won't be wreaking havoc around the house (and possibly hurting herself). Don't crate a dog for more than a few hours at a time, and don't use a crate until and unless you know the dog is crate-trained. A dog who's not crate-trained may be traumatized by the confinement, and may injure himself trying to get out.

Get help! A trainer may be able to give you behavioral suggestions for easing the transition to a new and happy life together. A trainer can also help you with the basics of crate-training. Training classes can help both of you brush up on the skills needed to form a lasting bond of mutual trust. MaxFund's staff includes a great trainer who will be happy to consult with you.

Conclusion.

If a dog's lucky enough to have been adopted by you (and vice versa), don't let the Runaway Syndrome cause a reversal of fortune that could be tragic. By understanding the dog's perspective about homecoming, and by taking extra precautions to prevent the dog from escaping, you can help ensure that the two of you will have a long and happy life together.