

After the Rescue: What Next?

By Sherry Woodard

So, you've successfully trapped a stray animal. What's the next step? If you haven't covered the trap yet, put a towel or blanket over it to reduce the animal's stress. Escape is a very real concern, so don't open the trap until you are inside a secure room. Dogs and cats may be frozen from fear or look tame, until the trap door opens and they bolt. Cornered animals may lunge and bite.



If you have trapped a friendly, healthy, neutered animal, he or she may be a lost pet whose family is looking for him/her. You'll need to take appropriate steps to find the animal's family. Some suggestions:

- Knock on doors in the area where you found the animal and ask people if they know who the pet belongs to
- Put up flyers in the area announcing that you've found a pet
- Contact local shelters and veterinarians to find out whether anyone has reported a lost pet
- Have the dog or cat scanned for a microchip at your vet's office or animal shelter
- Put an ad in the "lost and found" section of the local newspaper

Getting Medical Attention for the Animal

If it's feasible, visit your veterinarian while the animal is still in the trap. Medical attention is especially important if the animal is acting wild or aggressive or looks sick or injured. The vet can assess your new rescue's health needs. All animals who have been living on their own out in the world will need tests for diseases and vaccines. Most animals will need spay/neuter, too. If the animal is weak, dehydrated or sick, he may need to stay at the animal hospital until his health improves.

The vet can also scan the animal for an existing microchip, which could help you locate the animal's person. If there's no microchip, and you're considering adopting the animal, ask the vet to put in a microchip during your visit.

Bringing Your Stray Home

Before you bring your stray home, you'll need to do some preparation. You'll want to house the animal in a safe, escape-proof environment, so decide where your new charge will live. An enclosed space (such as a small spare bedroom or bathroom) without things to hide behind is recommended. Keep in mind that damage may occur

and messes will probably happen. Chances are, your rescue will not be litter-box or house-trained, or may have forgotten about proper bathroom habits. A litter box can be offered to dogs before they are comfortable walking on lead.

If you have other pets, you'll want to keep the stray separated from them for a while. Once your new pet has been medically cleared as healthy, your own well-socialized animals can begin helping this animal become comfortable. Well-socialized pets can be great role models for demonstrating good relationship skills.

Escape is common among strays; they don't know that your home is a safe haven yet, so may try desperately to find a way out. Be especially careful when opening doors and windows. Make sure you've blocked all escape routes and hiding places that you can't access. But do provide safe "hiding" places – a cardboard box or an open crate, for example – so the animal will feel protected to some extent.

Caring for Your Stray

If you haven't previously cared for the particular type of animal you've rescued, please consult with your veterinarian. Expect the animal to be stressed for a while. Some stressed animals will remain silent; others will yowl, howl, pace, pant, or throw themselves against the walls. Speak to the animal in a soothing voice, telling him that you want to help him relax. Many dogs will be so fearful or anxious that they will eliminate as you approach. If this happens, clean up the mess without displaying any anger toward the dog; if you are angry, you'll only cause the dog more stress.

You'll want to make sure the animal is eating and drinking water. Many animals will not eat or drink in front of you at first, so leave the animal alone with a small amount of food and water. Check periodically to see if the food has been eaten. By giving small amounts, you can remove any uneaten food and replace it with fresh food often.

If the animal is not eating at all, contact your veterinarian. A couple of days without food may be okay for a dog if the animal is healthy, but keep your doctor informed. Cats, however, cannot go without food for very long. Cats who don't eat for a few days can develop a serious liver problem called hepatic lipidosis.

Socializing Your Stray

If your rescue appears to be unsocialized – fearful and/or aggressive around people and new situations – he/she will need to be taught how to have healthy relationships. If an animal seems fearful, do not corner her or try to handle her until she's a bit more comfortable around you.

If you haven't worked with an antisocial or aggressive animal before, find someone with experience to help you. Contact animal control personnel, veterinarians, groomers or positive reinforcement trainers in your area; even if they can't help, they may be able to refer you to individuals or groups that work with unsocialized animals. (Also, you might want to see the resource "When the Helpline Can't Help.") Some animals may initially show aggression born out of fear, but settle down once they are handled.

For safety and to prevent problems, though, an animal displaying fear aggression needs to be in knowledgeable hands. A person who's experienced in working with aggressive

animals will know how to keep the animal from harming himself or others. A good trainer or animal behaviorist will work slowly and carefully to teach the animal to enjoy the company of people and to at least tolerate other animals. The experienced person will know how to teach desirable behavior and how to discourage inappropriate behaviors.

When choosing a trainer, behaviorist or other person experienced in working with aggressive animals, ask about his/her training philosophy. Some people feel that animals need to be taught to be submissive, and the way to do this is to use dominance, force and punishment. At Best Friends, we believe this approach creates unhealthy relationships that can be dangerous. Aggression by humans can cause or even teach aggression to the animals. Good human leaders do teach animals the value of good manners and they reinforce wanted behaviors. This kinder, gentler method involves the use of positive reinforcement: changing the animal's focus to prevent a negative reaction to a trigger, and then rewarding appropriate behavior.

Learn how to read an animal's body language to get clues about how he's feeling. (See the resource "The Look of Fear in Dogs" for more details.) Watch the whole body; animals are fast-moving, so look for warning signs of their next move. Reading body language accurately helps to keep both people and the animals safe. Use non-threatening body language yourself; for example, avoid direct eye contact, since it's interpreted as a challenge, a sign of aggression on your part.

Even if they're not aggressive, almost all rescued animals will lack some social and basic life skills. Remember that every animal is an individual. Some animals make progress quickly, but others need more time. Look for small signs of progress, such as the animal showing curiosity, exploring his space without anxiety. Once the animal seems comfortable with having you around, try hand-feeding or staying close while she is eating. Bring out some toys and entice the animal to play. Animals of all ages can make progress, so don't assume that you can't teach an old dog new tricks!

Introducing Other Animals as Role Models

To further socialize your stray, you can use other well-behaved animals as role models. Non-reactive animals can be a great help for animals who have inappropriate behavior. The new family member will watch your interactions with other animals, and will hopefully learn from them. The presence of another animal will sometimes drastically speed up the new pet's progress in terms of enjoying play, allowing you to be close and permitting touch.

Only introduce role models if your stray is healthy. Your role models should be adult animals who have been fully vaccinated. They must have wonderful greeting skills – that is, they should meet new animals in a friendly, non-threatening way. Don't use puppies and kittens as role models – they can be injured or killed – and avoid extreme size differences. Also, introduce animals of the same species first.

Here are the steps to follow to introduce other animals to your stray:

1. Ask an experienced animal person to help you with the introductions. Start by allowing the animals to see each other at a distance. Watch the body language of your rescue carefully. Is he interested, looking away, holding a hard stare? A hard stare into the eyes of another animal is not appropriate as a greeting. It is a challenge.

2. If your rescue looks interested, but is not staring intently, you can move the animals closer together. Continue watching the whole body for signs of aggression as you move closer. In cats, fear aggression can manifest itself as hissing or spitting, back arched with a puffed-up tail, or lunging forward and then retreating. In dogs, signs of fear aggression can be charging forward, growling or snapping, hackles up or tail tucked.
3. If there are no signs of aggression, you can have the animals meet for a first sniff. Since nose-to-nose greetings can be very stressful, you might want to have them meet through a screen or gate panel for safety. Hold the stray (or have him on lead) as you allow him to sniff the role model's body.
4. If there are any signs of aggression, keep the animals a safe distance apart and start teaching your new animal proper greetings. With you and someone else each holding an animal, allow the fearful/aggressive one to sniff the tail end of the social one. Try to prevent any nipping from dogs or swatting from cats. Muzzles can be used for safety. If your new family member attempts to injure the other animal or redirects aggression toward you, keep her at a safe distance from other animals and work on getting her more comfortable by gradually decreasing the space between her and other animals. Because strays often lack positive associations with other animals, practice is needed. Life out on the street was probably tough, and some people and other animals may have seemed unpredictable or aggressive.
5. Be prepared to stop aggressive behavior if it happens when the animals are close together. A loud, quick sound from you (try a sound like "aaut!") should be enough.
6. Until your rescue learns proper greetings, keep your role model at a safe distance. You can still use your role models, though, to demonstrate hand-feeding, to practice basic commands, to model healthy behavior, and to show how people and animals can have fun together.

Teaching a Dog to Walk on Lead

All dogs need to learn to walk comfortably on lead. A stray or rescue may take some time to master this skill. It may even be quite a while before you are touching and petting this dog, so get your rescue comfortable with those things before you work on walking on lead.

When you think the dog is ready, start slowly and be careful. Begin by getting the dog used to having a collar around her neck. For this exercise, you might want to use a cable noose (a vinyl-coated cable used by animal control personnel). Slip the noose over the dog's head, wait three seconds, and then take it off. Practice this exercise daily, increasing the amount of time that you leave the noose on. Then, progress to gradually adding tension to the cable. Watch the dog's body language carefully to detect any signs of anxiety or aggression.

Make sure you practice these initial steps inside a room or an escape-proof enclosure, since the dog will probably try to escape by pulling back, biting the cable or "gator rolling." If the dog pulls or rolls, simply stop moving and keep a small amount of tension on the noose. Once calm has returned, try to take another step and repeat the process if you meet with resistance. Most dogs realize eventually that their efforts aren't successful

and they are wasting energy. Within a couple of days, you should be able to lead the dog by the cable noose inside the escape-proof place. Then you can graduate to a regular collar and lead.

Go as slowly as you need to; some dogs take longer than others to get the concept of what you want them to do. If your stray has a doggie role model, it might help your new pet's comfort level to have the dogs walk together once you start taking your stray out for jaunts in the world at large.

Asking for Help

Major progress may take weeks or even months. If you don't have a lot of experience working with a challenging animal, progress will be slower. That's okay – just stay safe yourself and keep learning. Sometimes, though, the cat or dog with whom you are working stops making progress or starts threatening you. If you are at this point, you might need to take a deep breath and admit that you need help. Call people you know who have more experience working with a challenging animal – your veterinarian, local rescue groups, an animal behaviorist or trainer, Best Friends' Animal Help Department. These people will try to walk you through whatever roadblock you've come up against.

Please know that you are not alone: Help is out there! Thank you for your willingness to not only rescue animals, but to help them get what they need to live happy, healthy lives.

Sherry Woodard is the dog training and care consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission. She is available for phone or e-mail consultations about training and behavioral issues.

See also:

- Help Me ... I Found a Stray!
- Feral Dogs
- How to Trap Animals for Rescue or TNR
- Improving a Dog's Social Skills
- The Look of Fear in Dogs
- Positive Reinforcement: Training with Praise and Rewards
- Clicker Training for You and Your Pets
- Pulling on the Leash
- Teaching Your Dog Basic Commands
- Teaching Your Dog the Joys of Touch
- Introducing Dogs to Each Other
- Introducing a New Cat
- Introducing a Cat and a Dog
- When the Helpline Can't Help