

Safety Checklist For Your New Fearful Dog

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The eXtraOrdinary Dog / Shy and Fearful Dog
XO Dog LLC

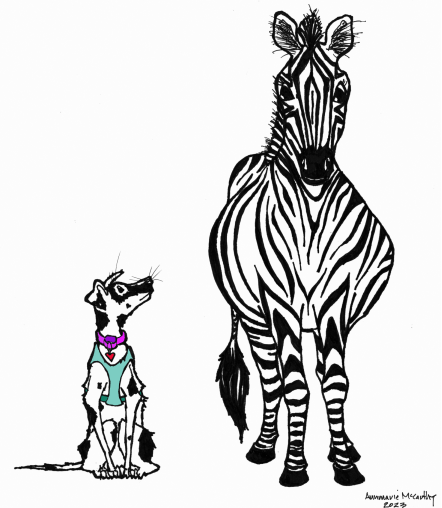
Congratulations! You are about to welcome a new dog into your home and heart. As much as you have anticipated and prepared for the arrival of your furry new family member, your new dog has no idea that her current living situation will change dramatically. Nor does she automatically know that she is now safe as you lead her to your car to start the journey to her wonderful new life.

The concept of safety is critical! **Your number one job is to keep your new dog safe:** physically safe AND emotionally safe by managing her environment and by giving her the time she needs to acclimate to her new home. The Safety Checklist for your New Fearful Dog will help set you up for success.

In order to reduce the risk of flight (running away) or fight (growling, snarling, snapping, or biting), and to facilitate building a trusting relationship, your first and most important priority is to *help your dog feel safe in her new home*. **If you have management and safety measures in place before your dog comes home, it sets the stage for a smooth transition.**

Feeling safe is imperative for your new dog's health and quality of life. Fearful dogs, by definition, do not feel safe. Fear can decrease appetite, accelerate heart rate and breathing, increase cortisol and adrenaline production, disrupt sleep patterns and shut down the thinking and learning part of the brain. If your new dog does not feel safe, she may act instinctively to escape from any situation that causes her to feel afraid or anxious. If she feels that her life is in danger, she can become incredibly resourceful in order to regain that sense of safety.

It is important to note that every dog is an individual, and will settle into their new family life in their own time. **Fearful dogs may take much longer than you expect to integrate into the household, and that is OK!** Set aside your expectations and any comparisons to a beloved previous dog or your Uncle Bob's dog or your neighbor's dog, and treat your dog as the unique, special individual she is. Give her the gift of time to decompress (which may take weeks or months) and acclimate to a new and unfamiliar environment at her own pace.



The following is a checklist that will help you prepare for the arrival of your new dog. Even if you have lived with dogs your whole life, fearful dogs are different from the average dog. It may help to compare a fearful dog to a zebra or other exotic animal; if you haven't personally interacted with zebras before, you will initially spend the majority of your time simply observing them and educating yourself on their unique preferences and needs. The same approach holds true for learning about your new dog.

Before You Bring Your New Dog Home:

- Have a family meeting to discuss safety measures and responsibilities**, including new entry and exit routines and behavior around the new dog.
- Write out an emergency plan.** If EMS workers need to enter the house in an emergency, or you need to leave the house in a hurry, or you live in an area subject to hurricanes, floods, fires, or severe weather, map out who is responsible for each animal in your home, agree on a meeting location and have all necessary equipment in a central location so you can leave calmly and safely.
- Set up a Safe Space/Home Base.** It should be in a quiet, low-traffic area of the house, such as a home office or extra bedroom, ideally with a door that can be closed as well as a baby gate for added safety. It should include a crate covered with a sheet or blanket and/or x-pen, bedding, water, toys, and an area to eat meals. If you don't have a room available, choose a quiet, out-of-the-way corner and use an x-pen draped with a sheet as the outer enclosure, and set up a crate with food and water inside the pen. Make sure that no one approaches while your new dog is resting or eating in her safe space, so she actually does learn that she is truly safe.
- Any supplies should be purchased and set up before your new dog arrives home.**
- If your new dog is too frightened to leave the room or the house, include training pads or indoor sod in the Safe Space** (or in a nearby room that she can easily walk to.) For easier maintenance, install pads or sod over an additional easy-to-clean impervious surface such as a large scrap of vinyl flooring (away from the sleeping and eating area).*

*If your new dog has an accident, never yell, shame, or scold her. Instead, quietly clean up the accident, offer opportunities to appropriately eliminate more frequently, and restrict access to other areas of the home unless your dog is actively supervised and/or has just eliminated in her designated spot.

- Dogproof the whole house, especially the Safe Space.** Remove any valuable, breakable, or dangerous items. Cover outlets and secure electrical cords. Anchor furniture or accessories that can easily be tipped over to the wall or floor, or remove altogether. Block access to fireplaces, crawl spaces, or any small, cramped nooks and crannies.

- Make sure all house doors and windows are secure and easily close and lock** (and stay closed). If you have a sticky door or a window that doesn't quite close all the way, now is the time to address the issue. Windows open just a crack can become an escape route for a panicked dog.
- Use inexpensive cling window film or blinds** at windows and glass doors to cut down on visual stimulation. You can also restrict access by using an x-pen as a fence, draped with a sheet.
- Play brown noise** using apps, air purifiers or fans, or classical or reggae music to mask new and unfamiliar household noise.
- Have a supply of the food that your new dog was fed at her previous home.** If possible, try not to change her diet while she is settling into her new home to prevent gastrointestinal upset and hinder house training.
- Buy and set up baby gates or x-pens at all exterior doors.** Many new dogs are lost because they bolted through an open door with no safety measures in place. Get the whole family in the habit of using the gates before you bring your new dog home.
- Map out safe routes to exit to an outdoor potty area** and note times that are quiet, with the least activity.
- Buy a martingale collar** with a quick-release buckle and have it properly fitted before you bring your dog home. This type of safety collar tightens just slightly if tension is applied, so your new dog cannot back out of the collar in a panic. It should not cut off breathing and is not intended for correction.
- Buy and fit a two-point harness or three-strap harness with a belly band** (especially if your new dog is severely fearful or an escape artist), in addition to a martingale collar.
- Have two sets of durable tags made with your phone number and address.** Securely fasten them to your dog's collar AND to the harness BEFORE you pick up your new dog.
- Fit your dog with a martingale collar and harness before you leave the adoption or pick up site.***

*If the noise of the tags causes your dog distress, invest in a quick-release martingale collar embroidered with your phone number in large, easy-to-read numbers.

- Have several extra leashes and at least one martingale collar as backup.** *You will need two leashes, one on your new dog's collar and one on her harness anytime she is outside, at least until she acclimates to her new home.*
- Confirm that your new dog is microchipped**, and ask for a physical or electronic copy of the info BEFORE you pick up your dog.
- Request any medical, adoption, or training documents to be emailed to you BEFORE you pick up your dog.** You should have nothing in your hands or on your mind except for two leashes attached to your new dog, or better yet, your dog in a crate.
- Watch videos about dog body language**, so you can better communicate with and advocate for your new dog.
- Have your fence thoroughly checked.** If you have a fenced yard, walk the entire perimeter. Check for loose boards and any size gap either in the fence or between the fence and the ground. Is the height adequate for the size dog you are bringing home? Remove or move any object that allows your dog to gain enough height to vault over the fence (like planters, wheelbarrows, patio furniture, etc.). Make all repairs and augmentations before your dog arrives. Fearful dogs can be escape artists.
- Check that all fence gates are self-closing**, and always check the gates before bringing your new dog outside.
- Consider investing in a GPS tracker that attaches to your dog's collar.**
- Buy and place a transport crate in the car several days before pick up.** If possible, place the dog in the crate in the facility, and carry the dog in a crate (which should be draped in a sheet to reduce visual stimuli) to the car. Once home, carry the dog in her crate directly into the house.
- If you are not using a crate, install a tethering or seat belt system**, plus a secondary leash permanently attached to the inside of the vehicle. Engage child locks on doors and do not open windows more than a fraction of an inch. Frightened dogs can easily squeeze through even a small window opening.
- If possible, have a second person in the car** to ensure that your new dog remains calm and safe for the ride home.

When You Bring Your New Dog Home:

- Ask the family to be as quiet and calm as possible.**
- Put other dogs, cats, or other animals away,** so your dog can enter the house without distractions.
- Bring your new dog directly into her safe space.**
- Allow her time to quietly decompress.** It could take weeks or months for your new dog to feel safe enough to explore her safe space or other rooms of the house.
- Be aware of your own body language to help your new dog acclimate to your presence.** Avoid staring at, looming over, or walking directly up to your new dog; your new dog can feel threatened by these rude (to dogs!) moves. Instead, glance softly at your dog, minimize the space you occupy by turning sideways and remaining quiet, allow your dog to approach or not, and lower your voice and energy level.
- Give your dog the space and time she needs to process her new world.** Do not force physical affection on her. Instead, let her voluntarily come to you. It may take some time but you are teaching her to trust that you and other family members act predictably and can be trusted.
- Set a routine from the beginning:** feed at specific times, offer enrichment and walks (if your dog can tolerate them) at regular, predictable intervals.
- Use baby gates or x-pens at all entrances.** You are a stranger to your new dog and your house is completely foreign to her. If your dog escapes, she does not yet have a strong enough bond or sense of home to find her way back to you. Vigilance and strict management are critical.
- Assume that your new dog is not house-trained.** If she is too frightened to leave the house, use an easily accessible indoor potty area to reduce her anxiety. As she gets more comfortable in her new home, you can transition to a schedule that allows her to eliminate outside.
- Always actively supervise children and other pets around your new dog.**
- Your new dog does not need to be taken on neighborhood walks (or to the pet store or to the dog park) if they frighten her.** Instead, keep her close to home (or even just the backyard) and bring interesting leaves, branches, rocks, etc. to her.*

*If your new dog struggles to leave her Safe Space, the house or yard, or enter the car, please do not force her to go further than she is comfortable. Talk to a qualified, force-free trainer who has experience with fearful dogs for help.

- Never leave your new dog unattended in a fenced yard.** It literally takes a moment for a desperate dog to scramble up a fence or dig underneath. You can use a longline attached to her harness to allow more freedom once you have started to build a relationship, but at no time should she be let loose to keep herself entertained.
- Keep her world small.** Your dog has a big job ahead of her: making sense of a new, unfamiliar environment and a houseful of strangers. Visitors to the house, trips to the store, and disruptions to her new routine can all set back progress or even increase her fear and anxiety. Offer her a calm, stable, and predictable environment.
- Let your new dog eat her meals without interference.** A fearful dog may not feel comfortable eating in front of a new family. She also may not feel comfortable eating out of a metal/ceramic/plastic bowl. Get creative and try plastic or paper plates (if the dog won't eat paper), scatter her food on the floor, or try a snuffle mat. Your dog may choose to eat in the middle of the night when the house is at its quietest. As long as she eats and drinks, it doesn't matter when or how she does it.
- Food and water bowl placement may make a difference in your new dog's comfort level.** Some dogs feel safer eating undisturbed in their crate. Some dogs like to be able to scan their surroundings as they eat, and food and water placed away from walls allow your dog to position herself to keep watch over the room and can help lower her anxiety. Nobody wants to have their back turned when they are feeling unsure about their environment! Establish a safe zone around food and water and allow your new dog to eat without interruption.
- Do not use treats or meals to lure your new dog closer to you.** By using food to ask your dog to move closer than she is comfortable, you are setting her up for struggling with 'approach/avoidance conflict', as well as weakening the tenuous bond of trust you are working so hard to grow.
- Try Fly By Treats.** You can use small, delicious treats like baked or grilled chicken or beef, or tiny pieces of cheese and as you walk by her space, gently toss a treat right next to her, and then walk away. Make sure that you are not walking up to her to give her the treat. Rather, *maintain a distance where she is not disturbed or concerned by your presence*, and then quietly walk away.*

*It is ok if she doesn't immediately eat the treats. She may not yet feel safe enough to eat in front of you, and that is also ok. She may eat them when the house is quiet or when you walk away. She is still learning that you bring good stuff, and also give her the distance she needs to feel safe.

- Be your dog's advocate in all things.** If people in close proximity make her anxious, ask for some space, or better yet, calmly remove your dog from the situation. You are her voice and your priority is ALWAYS her safety and wellbeing.
- Spend time doing nothing with your dog.** Allow her to set the distance without verbal or physical pressure, and read out loud to her, watch tv or work on your computer while quietly narrating what you are doing. If you are able to do so, sit on the floor away from her to make yourself more approachable, and even if she does come closer to investigate, do not reach out to touch her. Let her make the choice to stay close or walk away. By doing nothing, you will become predictable and more trustworthy.
- Offer daily enrichment at least twice a day.** Long-lasting chews, frozen stuffed kongs, scatter-feeding meals on the floor, or engaging food puzzles decrease stress and promote mental stimulation. Make sure that the enrichment is very easy at first, so as not to frustrate your new dog.
- Allow your dog to feel comfortable enough to come to you.** Sit quietly and keep your hands close to your sides. Pet under the chin or on the chest for a count of 3, then take your hand away to see if your dog stays with you or walks away. Either way, you are allowing her the choice of being petted. Avoid petting on the top of the head, on the legs, or on the back.
- Consider keeping a written or photo journal of your new dog's progress.** You will be amazed at the transformation!