DOG PLUS ME · THE PLAYBOOK SERIES · NO. 02

The Rescue Dog Roadmap

The stage-by-stage plan for your rescue's first 90 days: a safe first night, a dog who trusts you, and a home that works for you both. For shelter dogs, rescues from abroad and adult dogs of every age.

Reward-based | The Traffic Light Check | 14 real-life situations | 10 printables



DOGPLUSME.COM · EDITION 1.0 · 2026

START HERE · 2 MINUTES

You don't need to read this whole guide tonight.

You need the parts that match your dog and your week. Find yourself below and follow that path. Everything else is there when you need it.

IF THIS IS YOU…	READ THIS, IN THIS ORDER
Your dog arrives today	Ch. 1. That's enough for tonight. Tomorrow, the Traffic Light Check (Ch. 2), then Ch. 4. Arriving next week? Ch. 3 and Printable 1 first.
Hiding, or won't eat	Situation 1 (hiding) or Situation 2 (food) → keep the world small (Ch. 4). Still hiding most of the day, or not eating normally, by the end of week 2? Call the rescue and the vet (our red flag).
Growled at you	Situation 4 → the Traffic Light Check (Ch. 2). Never punish a growl. Any snap or bite? Part 4, "When to get help", first. Any bite that breaks skin needs medical assessment.
Can't leave them alone	Situation 6 → first short absences (Ch. 6). Panic, howling, damage or self-injury? Film it, then call your vet.
Bolted or nearly got loose	Situation 13 → two points of contact and the airlock (Ch. 1), today. Your dog is loose right now? The lost-dog plan in Situation 13.
Other pets or kids at home	Ch. 7 → Situation 10 (resident dog), 11 (cat) or 12 (kids). Never leave a child alone with a dog, any size of dog.
"When will it get better?"	The next two pages. Then the Weekly Settle Score (Ch. 4 and Ch. 9): it tells you if this week is normal or a reason to call for help.

How this guide is different

- **It watches the dog, not the calendar.** A 2-minute weekly score tells you when to move on, when to hold, and when to call for help.
- **It's honest about 3-3-3.** It's a rough map, not science. We show you what the research does say.
- **It puts safety first.** Doors, leashes and ID come in Ch. 1, not an appendix.
- **It hands off, it doesn't pad.** Where another guide has the full plan, we give the first step and say exactly where to find the rest.
- **It's kind.** No "pack leader" rules, no corrections, no shock, prong or choke collars, no dragging a dog out of hiding, and no "throw them in at the deep end". A scared dog can't learn, and punishment can make fear worse.

WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Every recommendation is based on published guidance from veterinary schools and hospitals, welfare charities and peer-reviewed research, in plain steps. Where sources disagree, we take the safer, welfare-first position. Where a rule is our own, we say so. Sources are listed at the back. This guide is educational and doesn't replace your vet.

HONEST EXPECTATIONS

What's normal: honest timelines

You'll see guides promising your rescue will be "settled in 3 months". We won't. No reliable source gives an end date, so we don't invent one.

Many rescues use the 3-3-3 rule: about 3 days to decompress, 3 weeks to learn your routine, 3 months to feel at home. It's a rule of thumb, not a research finding. Use it as a rough map, and let your dog's signals, not the calendar, tell you when to move on. Some dogs need 6 months or longer.

ROUGH MAP	WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS	WHAT'S NORMAL
Days 1–3	One study found dogs rested better at home than in the shelter, with extra rest on night 2	Lots of sleep. Hiding, a small appetite, accidents, not wanting to be touched
Week 1	The same study found stress hormones significantly lower 7 days after adoption. It measured hormones, not feelings	Still cautious, but starting to explore. Accidents and trouble being alone are common now
Weeks 2–6	Another study found stress hormones in the hair back to pet-dog levels 6 weeks after adoption. It was small: about 22–24 dogs by then	Learning your routine. Clinginess. Good days and bad days
Months 2–6	One study of 158 dogs from abroad found fear and avoidance fell from 26.4% to 13.7% over 6 months. That's owner reports, from one country	The real dog arrives. New behaviors can show up as old fears fade (Ch. 8)

The rough map is the 3-3-3 rule, not these studies. Your dog may be faster or slower. Both are normal.

OUR HONEST ANSWER TO "WHEN WILL IT GET BETTER?"

Most dogs improve a lot over the first months; some take 6 months or more. Day 90 is a checkpoint, not a finish line. Many people call the first weeks the honeymoon period. Research suggests it's more mixed: fear and clinginess usually ease, while some behaviors, like barking at strangers, chasing, or minding being handled, can show up or grow over the first months as your dog settles. That isn't the dog getting worse. It's often the real dog arriving.

Our standard: "settled"

"Settled" is our own standard, not a vet or charity one. Your dog is settled when, **for 3 weeks in a row:**

- [ ] the Weekly Settle Score is 12 or more out of 14
- [ ] no item scores 0
- [ ] there's no red flag

Until then, your dog is "settling in", even if things look great. Settled doesn't mean your dog never has a bad day. It means bad days are rare, and your dog bounces back.

Three things that will happen (and are normal)

1. **Your dog sleeps more than you expected.** Let them. Rest is part of the recovery (Ch. 4).
2. **A great week, then a worse one.** It's not failure. It's data. A score 1–2 points lower than last week, or no higher than week 1, means you hold the stage another week (our rule; Ch. 9). A steady week above week 1 still counts as progress.
3. **Something new shows up as your dog settles.** Barking at visitors, chasing, or minding a hand on the collar. That's often the real dog arriving (Ch. 8, Situation 14).

READ THIS IF YOU HAVE REGRETS

You're not a bad adopter.

Maybe you're a week in and thinking "what have we done?" Adopters write about "massive regrets" and "adoption remorse". Some mourn their "old life".

Many adopters feel this in the first weeks. In a study of puppy owners, these feelings faded over time. You haven't failed, and your dog isn't bad. Here's why.

Your dog has lost everything familiar

Kennel, smells, people, routine: all gone in one car ride. A new rescue dog is a stressed learner in a strange place. Hiding, not eating and pacing are what stress looks like. You don't need to know their past, so don't guess a backstory. Treat the dog in front of you.

It isn't dominance, and they aren't testing you. The "pack leader" idea is wrong. Veterinary behaviorists reject it. You don't need to win. You need to make the world small, safe and predictable.

How to start again

1. **Make the world smaller.** No visitors, no outings, no new rooms for now. Fewer new things, fewer reactions.
2. **Stop reaching.** Hands at your sides. Let your dog come to you (Ch. 4).
3. **Start a log.** Eating, sleep, toilets, what scared them (Printable 5). Your log, not your mood, shows progress.
4. **Say yes to the rescue's support.** One study found adopters turned down most offers of free behavior help. It was one support program, but the lesson holds: take the call.

THIS IS NORMAL FOR NOW

- Hiding, sleeping a lot, a small appetite
- Accidents, even in a "house-trained" dog
- Following you everywhere, or ignoring you

GET HELP IF

- No food at all for more than 24 hours, or vomiting, diarrhea or lethargy
- A snap, a bite, or panic with self-injury
- Still hiding most of the day, or not eating normally, by the end of week 2 (our red flag)

Right-hand column? That's not your failure either. Vet first, then the rescue and a qualified professional. Part 4, "When to get help", tells you who to call.

IS IT WORTH IT?

One UK study found owners who found the work harder than expected were far more likely to return their dog: 9.9 times the odds. It's an association, not proof. But it's why this book tells you the hard parts up front. You're reading this page, so you're already doing better than you think.

CONTENTS

What's inside

PART 1 · THE ROADMAP ON ONE PAGE

1 **Tonight: the first 24 hours** 10
The den, the doors, ID, food and the first night

2 **The Traffic Light Check** 13
Green, amber or red: read your dog before every activity

PART 2 · THE 90 DAYS

3 **Before They Arrive** 17
Setup, escape-proofing and what to ask the rescue

4 **Days 1–3: Decompress** 23
A small world, the Pet-Pause Check and your first score

5 **Days 4–7: First Routines & the Vet Visit** 29
A predictable day and a low-stress first checkup

6 **Weeks 2–3: Learning Your Home** 34
Routine, house-training, short absences and the Stress Bucket

7 **Weeks 3–6: Meeting the World** 40
Pets, kids, visitors and new places, at your dog's pace

8 **Months 2–3: The Real Dog Arrives** 45
What shows up as your dog settles, and what to do

9 **The 90-Day Map** 51
Every stage, every gate, and life after day 90

PART 3 · FIX IT FOR YOUR SITUATION

→ **Find your dog. Fix that.** 58
Match what you're seeing to the right situation

S1 **Hides & won't come out** 60

S2 **Won't eat, or eats only alone or at night** 63

S3 **Accidents in the house** 66

S4 Growls at you 69
On the couch, when you come in, when touched

S5 Scared of one person 72

S6 Panics or howls when left alone 75

S7 Shadows you, paces & can't settle at night 78

S8 Freezes, refuses or bolts on walks 81

S9 Lunges or barks at dogs or people on leash 84

S10 Meeting the resident dog 87

S11 Meeting the cat 90

S12 Kids in the house 93

S13 Door-dashing, escapes & the lost-dog plan 96

S14 "The honeymoon's over" 99
New behavior as your dog settles

PART 4 · TOOLS

T When to get help 102
Red flags by week, and who to call

P 10 Printables 106
Before-They-Arrive & Escape-Proof Checklist · First 72 Hours Plan · Traffic Light Card · Pet-Pause & Household Rules Handout · Daily Settle Log · Weekly Settle Score Chart · Stress Bucket Planner · First Vet Visit Prep · Introductions Planner · The 90-Day Map

✓ What's next 117
Life after day 90, getting help, the rest of the series

§ Sources 119