

PREPARING FOR THE ARRIVAL OF A DOG IMPACTED BY TRAUMA



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TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

The information in this booklet is intended to help you meet the needs of a dog who has experienced trauma. Not all dogs will need all of the measures described in this booklet and the intention isn't to scare you or put you off but to support you. Clients regularly tell me it would have saved them so much stress if they'd known these things before getting the dog so by covering the 'worst case scenario' I hope you'll find the transition easier. As well as being tough and, at times, overwhelming, you're also at the start of a beautiful journey and building a relationship that will probably be one of the most significant in your life. Enjoy every tiny milestone, you're making a huge difference to this dog's life.

In order to provide trauma-informed care we need to think about two things:

- The physical environment
- The way we interact with the dog

Both are woven into the ideas listed below.

THINGS TO DO BEFORE THE DOG ARRIVES

Part of supporting dogs impacted by trauma is recognising the signs of trauma and understanding the impact of trauma on physical and psychological health. Get your geek on!

There is lots of information about the impact of trauma in the 'guides' section of the ['Dogs Impacted By Trauma'](#) facebook group and I run a variety of courses which you can find [here](#).

Signs of trauma can include:

Box 1: Signs of potential trauma in dogs (there can be lots of other reasons for these behaviours, we need to look at the whole picture):



- *Intense avoidance, escape or anxiety*
- *Pacing*
- *Looking for escape routes*
- *Panic (e.g. throwing themselves at windows)*
- *Freezing*
- *Inability to settle*
- *Shaking*
- *Avoidance of eye contact*
- *Elimination (peeing or pooing when approached)*
- *Hypervigilance (constantly scanning for danger)*
- *Appeasement behaviours (e.g. licking lips, yawning)*

- *Shutdown (the 'eeyore' pose, unresponsive to stimuli and uninterested in the environment)*
- *Over-compliance (seeming compliant but visibly frightened)*
- *Not wanting to eat*
- *Anhedonia (not enjoying things they used to enjoy, or that most dogs enjoy)*
- *Hiding*
- *Weight loss*
- *Chronic or intermittent diarrhoea*
- *Not interacting with other dogs or people*
- *Compulsive behaviours*
- *Aggression*
- *Disturbed sleep*



WORKING WITH THE RESCUE ORGANISATION

- Don't be afraid to ask questions. A good rescue will understand that the better prepared you are, the more likely the placement will succeed. Write a list as a family and ask the rescue to answer them. Examples might include:
 - How is the dog around unfamiliar people?
 - How is the dog around unfamiliar dogs?
 - Do you know anything about their early life experiences / environment?
 - How many homes have they had? Why did those placements break down?
 - What are the dog's likes and dislikes?
 - What have they really enjoyed since they've been with you?

- Ask for videos. Photos are a moment in time and don't give you much information, but videos will tell you more. Ask for videos when the dog is without people (easy to do by propping a phone up somewhere), with people and with other dogs. This way you can start to gauge how frightened the dog is, how shut down they might be and whether they lean on dogs or people for support.
- Send a scent package. Put some t-shirts you've all worn and some blankets other pets have rested on in a box and send it to them. Ask the rescue to put it in the dog's kennel and video their response. **A lack of interest (or even fear) isn't personal or a sign that they won't bond with you, it just gives you good information about the dog's current state of mind.** It also allows them to become familiar with you. My friend Nat Light says it's like writing them a letter!
- Send some items (a variety of toy types to see what they like best and a blanket or two) that you can bring back home with you on the day so they have some familiar things around them as they settle in to your home.
- Get the dog's microchip number and vet records sent to you.
- If possible, ask the rescue to have the dog seen by a vet before they travel. We want to avoid a super stressful event in those first few days and weeks whilst you're building a relationship, so asking them to do a health check and prescribe any medication if they're in the UK (including a repeat prescription for anxiety medication such as an SSRI) is invaluable. Obviously if the dog shows signs of illness or injury then you may have to take them to the vet for their welfare, but we want to avoid it if possible.

OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER IN THE WEEKS BEFORE ARRIVAL

- Register with your local vet. It is worth ringing them before the dog arrives and asking if they do home visits. Explain that the dog may need anxiety medication (this will help them hugely in those first few months).
- Get the dog insured.
- Speak to a properly qualified and experienced behaviourist. If you can book a consultation for before the dog arrives you won't regret it... you only get one chance to make a first impression! I do consultations all over the world, you can take a look at my website [here](#).
- Once you have as much information as possible, sit down as a family and complete a safety plan (you can find a template / example [here](#)). None of us react at our best during an emergency, they're horribly stressful! Thinking about potential problems beforehand means you'll be prepared and can just follow a plan that you'd thought through when you were clear headed. If you stick it to the fridge, it is a useful reminder of things everyone in the household has agreed to. It doesn't have to be a boring chore... order pizza, open the wine and chat it all through (nothing gets kids on board like pizza, right?!).

INVOLVING CHILDREN

Preparing kids for the fact that the dog might be too frightened to approach them, let alone play, can take some of the sting out of it. Instead, turn them into a mini scientist! Teach them about dog body language (there are some great resources [here](#)). I've laminated a poster like the one on the next page and use a wipe-clean marker to get kids to tick off every one they see.

DOGGIE LANGUAGE

starring Boogie the Boston Terrier



ALERT



SUSPICIOUS



ANXIOUS



THREATENED



ANGRY



"PEACE!"
look away/head turn



STRESSED
yawn



STRESSED
nose lick



"PEACE!"
sniff ground



"RESPECT!"
turn & walk away



"NEED SPACE"
whale eye



STALKING



STRESSED
scratching



STRESS RELEASE
shake off



RELAXED
soft ears, blinky eyes



"RESPECT!"
offer his back



FRIENDLY & POLITE
curved body



FRIENDLY



"PRETTY PLEASE"
round puppy face



"I'M YOUR LOVEBUG"
belly-rub pose



"HELLO I LOVE YOU!"
greeting stretch



"I'M FRIENDLY!"
play bow



"READY!"
prey bow



"YOU WILL FEED ME"



CURIOUS
head tilt



HAPPY
(or hot)



OVERJOYED
wiggly



"MMMMM...."



"I LOVE YOU,
DON'T STOP"

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Kids love playing the 'invisible dog game'. The rules are they simple; they just have to act as though the dog doesn't exist (see explanation under 'therapeutic relationships' below). They get points for doing this really well, and lose points when they 'see' the dog. Points mean prizes!

Once the dog seems able to stay relaxed when people pass their room / safe space whilst totally ignoring them, play the 'baby gate game'. Every time someone passes the dog's baby gate get them to pause (still facing in the direction they were walking, not turning to face the dog) and throw something yummy in. When the dog is relaxed with this, turn to face the dog when you pause, still avoiding eye contact. When the dog is happy with this, add in eye contact. When the dog is ok with this, stay a bit longer and chuck 2 treats. When the dog eats the first one while you're still there, give story time a try.

When the dog is ready, I find children absolutely love story time (you can practice this first yourself to check the dog is relaxed enough. If they're not, you'll have to play the 'baby gate game' for longer first). Sit with the child as far away from the dog's safe space as possible, but in the same room (or in the hallway, but visible). Sit at a 45 degree angle so you're not directly facing the dog and avoid eye contact. Using their best soothing, sing-song voice, get the child to read their favourite stories to the dog. While they are doing this, gently roll treats to the dog, or even behind them (so they don't have to leave their safe space to get them – we don't want treats to come with a cost of doing something the dog doesn't want to do – that's not how trust works).

ADAPTING THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Depending on how your new dog is impacted by trauma (some dogs might be super resilient and love people, others may never have had any close contact with people or lived in a home), you may need to make some changes to the home environment.

- If at all possible, give the dog a room of their own, at least while they settle in (prepare for this to take months rather than days or weeks). If this isn't possible, provide them with a choice of at least 3 safe spaces so that they can choose where to go. Safe spaces will need to be in quiet, low-traffic areas. Give plenty of bedding and ideally a choice of bed types (one safe space could have a covered crate, another a raised bed, another a normal bed). Make sure the dog does not need to leave their safe space for their basic needs to be met (so provide food, water, toys and access to a toilet area). It might take a bit of time for the dog to choose their safe space. At first they might explore a lot and then when they decide on a safe space they might retreat for a few days (or weeks). This can feel like a step backwards but it is usually a sign that they've gone from feeling unsafe (wandering around, not sure where they should make their bolthole) to safe. Don't worry if the dog doesn't choose any of the safe spaces you've set up. They might choose their own, and try to allow that if it is practical. Under beds or in wardrobes are common choices!
- Set up a petcam. I use the 'ring' security camera and then a subscription (currently £3.49 per month) that allows me to view and record remotely 24/7.
- Think about reducing noise and the view outside as much as possible. White noise machines and dog calming music (yep, it's a thing!) can help. I find that soothing noise from 2 or 3 different sources (e.g. laptop, radio) makes it harder for the

dog to pick out scary noises from outside. Close curtains or blinds, at least at first. If the dog doesn't have their own room this gets miserable pretty quickly so think about using Rabbit Goo adhesive film for the windows (easily available on Amazon).

- Plan how you're going to manage toileting. Toilet training can come later, the most important thing is for the dog to feel safe. If the garden is not completely secure, you're worried about getting them back inside or they may not leave their safe space, consider providing a toilet area in their room / next to their safe space. You can use puppy pads which are easy to clean up.
- Although you'll probably want to close the door to their room at first (if they're scared of people), get some baby gates for when they're able to cope with people walking past.
- Plug in a DAP (dog appeasing pheromone) diffuser as soon as possible in the dog's room (ideally a few weeks before the dog arrives).

THERAPEUTIC INTERACTIONS

If we build a relationship with our dog in the right way, the relationship itself can become therapeutic and help dogs heal. One of the key themes throughout this booklet is 'you only get one chance to make a first impression'! If you can show the dog you are safe from the start that's all they will ever learn about you ~ and that's an incredibly special thing. I think of relationships like a bank balance. If you start from neutral (£0) and only ever have positive interactions, your balance will grow quickly. If you start with a hefty overdraft, it'll take a lot longer.

Picture this. You're in a plane crash and you land in the middle of the African bush. Would you feel better if...

- a. All the lions turned and stared at you
- b. All the lions totally ignored you

It's a no-brainer, right? If they're ignoring you, you automatically think 'ok I might just survive this'. That's why we always recommend totally ignoring the dog for as long as they need us to. It feels mean because we're used to dogs who want to be with us. This dog will too, in time, but right now you're the lion.

Avoid any kind of punishment (including things that might seem gentle but rely on being aversive to the dog like noise, spray or vibrating collars). These dogs' brains are primed to perceive danger (it's kept them alive so far) so even mild rebukes are likely to be perceived as threatening.

Avoid withholding stuff the dog needs until they do something they don't want to do. For example, don't offer them a treat and ask them to come close to you to get it. This doesn't foster a feeling of safety and trust, it tells the dog 'things come with a price tag'.

You may need to avoid training. Training is great for regular dogs of course, and has its place with fearful dogs at the right time, but right now they are likely to find being the focus of your attention scary. Imagine if you were abducted by aliens and they wanted you to do something but you had no idea what, you didn't understand their instructions and you weren't sure what the consequences of getting it wrong might be... it would feel intimidating.

Being in control and having choices make us all feel better about something scary. It is empowering. My phobia is heights, and I can just about cope with driving up the mountain road but if Carl is driving... don't ask. If dogs come from an environment where they

have had no control, this is the single biggest thing we can do for them. If they've never had any control it might take them a while to learn that they can influence their own world but that's ok. Sit down with everyone in the household and brainstorm some ways in which you can give your dog choices and control over their life and body.

Another big factor in coping with scary stuff is predictability. If we know something is coming, we cope better, we can brace ourselves. Stick to a rigid routine to begin with. Think about your language. Be consistent with words and you'll give the dog much needed cues about what is coming up. **Always** wake the dog up before standing up or moving by saying their name gently three times and waiting for them to make eye contact with you (if they can).

ON THE DAY

Set up the petcam and make sure it is recording. You'll probably need to avoid disturbing the dog for at least a few hours so having eyes on them in this way allows you to monitor their stress, whether they are eating and drinking etc.

Use DAP spray liberally over designated safe areas / in the dog's room 15 minutes before they are due to arrive.

Set up several super easy food stations in the dog's room / safe area just before they arrive, like a licki-mat, a long-lasting chew, a stuffed kong and put some food and water in regular bowls. These activities reduce arousal (if the dog feels relaxed enough to engage with them) and you can get a good idea of how they're feeling by seeing when they're settled enough to eat.

Traumatised dogs are a flight risk, so you may be asked to use equipment that we wouldn't normally recommend, like slip leads as a

back up to their harness. The most important thing is getting the dog safely to your home. Follow the rescue's safety advice. If the dog is likely to find travelling very stressful, you may want to ask them about getting some anxiety medication (called 'event medication') from their vet.

Ask the rescue to transport / take the dog into their room in a covered crate if at all possible, whilst you stay out of sight. We don't want your first meeting to be super high-stress. If they're not able to do this, for example if you're meeting them somewhere for a hand over because the dog has travelled from abroad, ask the transport staff to put the dog into a crate in your car and cover it (spray it with DAP spray 15 minutes before the meeting time). Carry the crate, still covered, into the dog's room. Open the door to the crate, secure it with a cable tie as quickly as possible and leave the room. Close the door and give the dog plenty of time to settle. You can monitor them using the petcam.

Depending on how the dog presents, it may be best to have one designated care-giver who only goes into the room to clean up and change food and water. Once the dog stays calm while these basic tasks happen, they're probably ready for you to start building a relationship using the ideas above.

Remember... YOU ONLY GET ONE CHANCE TO MAKE A FIRST IMPRESSION.

Be prepared for this trauma-informed approach to take longer than other methods (which usually involve at best luring, at worst forcing, the dog to do things so they 'get used to it'). We're giving the dog choices, so they're bound to choose space until they feel safe. It may seem as though you're not reaching goals as quickly as other people

but that's because they're measuring the wrong stuff. Don't think of it as a race to *do things*, think about how the dog *feels*. I absolutely promise it pays off in the long-term. These dogs often hit a glass ceiling, beyond which they just can't progress. How many times have you heard 'oh they're really traumatised, they'll always be scared', years after a dog arrived. But that doesn't have to be the case. Taking your time and really going slowly in the beginning might just get rid of that glass ceiling altogether.

Good luck, and enjoy every second, this is going to be the most amazing journey.

Rach