

Flight Risk Dogs: Tips for Handling and Training

Many dogs that come into rescue are scared at first. They are in a brand new place with brand new people and maybe in an entirely new geographic area. On top of all of the unfamiliarity, they may also have gotten a bunch of veterinary work, which can be frightening as well. It often takes a week or two for dogs to settle into a new environment and routine. Until they are settled in, many dogs are deemed a “Flight Risk”, meaning if they somehow get loose and get out, they will take off and not return to their handler or foster and run into roads where they could be injured or killed. There are many things we can do to minimize the risk to these frightened dogs.

Precautions

These tips should be taken with any new and unfamiliar dog, however they are doubly important if that dog is frightened and deemed a flight risk.

- Make sure all restraining equipment (collar, harness, etc) is fitted PROPERLY to the dog. It should be snug enough that they cannot get out of it, but loose enough to be comfortable and not restrict breathing or movement.
- When going outside: have a harness AND collar on the dog. Collar for ID tags, harness because they are more difficult to escape, especially if the dog’s head is not much wider than its neck. Have a separate leash attached to each one. I like to have the collar leash in my hand, and the harness leash attached to a belt so that even if the leash slips from my hand, they are still attached to me.
- AND/OR use a martingale collar on the dog. These collars, also called humane choke, are loose and comfortable when the dog is at rest, but if the dog tries to pull, they tighten up tightly around the dog’s neck to prevent being able to back out and escape without risking choking them (there is a stop in place to prevent the collar tightening too much).
- Have the dog wear a trailing leash in the house. This allows you to restrain him if a door unexpectedly opens.
- Have an ID tag with a phone number on it attached to the dog somewhere at all times (usually collar). You can have a metal tag engraved at Petco for a few bucks. It doesn’t need a name on it, just the phone number and “Foster Dog” so that it can be transferrable to your next foster. Tags with phone numbers are the NUMBER ONE way dogs get returned if they are found by a stranger. Many people will not take the dog to a vet to get scanned for a microchip and sometimes shelters and animal control don’t scan either.
- ALWAYS check where the dog is before you open a door that leads outside to an unfenced area.
- Never leave the dog unattended outside, even in a fenced yard or tied up. The dog could climb over or dig under a fence or they could chew a tie-out.
- Be aware of loud noises that may occur and try to keep them to a minimum. If construction or fireworks will be happening in your area, it is best to keep the dog doubly contained (crated, x-pen, leashed to you, etc).
- Make sure their microchip is registered with up to date information! Many lost dogs have microchips that aren’t up to date and so owners cannot be found!

Training

There are lots of different ways to train a dog that will reduce his chances of choosing to flee. Here are some ideas:

- **Recall and bond building:** Having a good recall and teaching a dog that returning to its person is the most rewarding thing will help a dog choose to run TO you rather than away from you when frightened. Practice this often by rewarding the dog with its favorite treat or toy every time he chooses to come to you. Reinforce that with a command like “come” or “here” once the dog comes to you on his own for pets/treats/play. This should be done many times throughout the day in order to override his flight response.
- **Door Manners:** Teaching the dog that an open door is not permission to go through it. Having this inhibition in the dog will hopefully cause them to not rush out of an open door when frightened. The goal is to again override that flight response with routine and muscle memory. This is fairly easy to train with a dog that is motivated to go outside. First teach a sit, then work on wait. Slowly open the door, if the dog’s butt comes off the floor, the door closes again. Once you have the dog seated with the door open, give them the release word (like “ok!”) to let them go out. It doesn’t take long for them to learn that sitting and waiting politely gets them to get to go outside. If you are consistent with doing this EVERY time they go outside, they will quickly learn, and hold onto that learning, that an open door means nothing. See “Impulse Control/Door Dashing” Handout
- **Creating a “Den”:** Dogs, like people, have two main methods for dealing with a fearful situation: Fight or Flight. Most dogs choose flight, and that is our concern here. Dogs exhibit “flight” in two ways. The first is to just take off and run away from the scary thing. The second way dogs exhibit “flight” is to find somewhere to hide. With a flight risk dog, encouraging the hiding instinct with a “Den” (crate usually), can help the dog choose a safer escape from what is scaring him than trying to get out of the house and run off. Make the crate a really good, cozy place. Put it in a quiet corner in a room that is around people (so he still feels a part of the family) but gets little traffic. Reward the dog every time he goes into his crate on his own, and allow him access to it when he’s nervous. Please ask for more info on changing the flight response from “flee” to “hide”.

If the Dog gets Away

- **DO NOT CHASE IT!** This may cause the dog to run faster or into traffic and make him see you as threatening and therefore less likely to return to you. Instead, try to get a favorite toy (especially squeaky) or treat, sit down on the ground, and happily call to the dog showing them what awesome stuff you have if they would only come back.
- Sometimes opening a car door and asking the dog if it wants to go for a ride will get it to come back to a contained space.
- If the dog is dog friendly, using a dog it knows and likes may entice it to come close.
- Many lost foster dogs not from the area will not go far. Canvas the neighborhood, put up fliers, and knock on doors. Look at people walking their dogs, many dog finders will walk the dog in the neighborhood hoping that someone will recognize

it. Other people that found it and think it is a stray for them to keep may also walk it in the neighborhood.

- Contact your local animal shelters, veterinary clinics, and police departments with a description of the dog so that if he is found and turned in he can be returned to you quickly.
- Spread the word on social media. Many communities have a Lost and Found Facebook page, or garage sale page. Submit a report to Lost Dogs of Wisconsin, they will make up a flier you can use and spread the word in their network with updates of sightings.
- Keep an eye on Craigslist's Pet Community page for your area and post lost dog on there as well. Many people will post found dogs there and some deplorable people will try to sell dogs they find on there.
- Set up his crate outside with some blankets and toys that he likes and some food in it so that he has an incentive to return once he calms down. If you can put it in a garage with an automatic opener and a webcam so you can see if he comes in to close the garage door on him, that would be best.