

Reprinted with permission from Whippet-L ~ with sincere appreciation to Kim Otero, Wheatland whippets!

The original post:

After much soul searching, I decided to find a home for Tigger and dropped her off on Sunday. Unfortunately she didn't appreciate my thoughtfulness of placing her in a home of whippet-loving people with just her and a mother and child. At the first opportunity she escaped. Now I'm feeling guilty of placing her. I thought she would appreciate being the only whippet in a loving household and not just in the kennels, and affection being shared among six whippets and a mini-dach. How wrong I was.

Response from Kim Otero, Wheatland Whippets:

It's very sad to hear that Tigger escaped and I hope she is found soon. Please don't feel guilty about what happened; it's not your fault. You unselfishly placed her in a home where she could give and receive more love, and that is always a good thing. Given enough time, Tigger will appreciate her new situation.

I've heard many similar stories over time and it's made me think. I've had considerable experience over the years with placing adults, rescues, and older puppies. The reason why this scenario keeps repeating itself over and over is not because rehoming adult whippets is wrong, it's because people don't realize how at risk a whippet is during the transition to a new home.

It is normal canine behavior for dogs to bond strongly with their homes, regardless of what kind of home that is. The people, dogs, routine, and environment are what they are used to, and represent security and safety to them. It's normal for dogs to want to preserve a secure and "known" situation; for this species it's an important survival technique. Even very well-socialized dogs have this instinct.

Given that all dogs have this strong instinct, we then make the mistake of thinking that the dog has human emotions, intelligence, and motives. We know that the new home is going to be better for him. We assume the dog knows this too. We assume he will appreciate this. Both these assumptions are erroneous because dogs do not have the reasoning ability to understand these things.

The dog may really like the new people, and enjoy their company, and perhaps even know them well enough to have bonded with them somewhat. But the dog still knows his old home, and will do everything he can to stay there. Dogs simply cannot fathom that a new situation could be better than the one he is familiar with. This is too complex a thought and his mind doesn't work that way.

One of a dog's greatest fears is to be separated from his pack and familiar environment - it will make him panic. This is normal canine behavior, and we should expect this behavior when separating him from his original home.

Fortunately, canines as a species are infinitely adaptable. The attachment to a former home will give way to an attachment to the new home in time. Again, once a transition is complete, he is just as happy and secure in the new home as the old one. He never forgets his former owners and will always be happy to see them, but he doesn't sit around all day and pine away for them for the rest of his life. Dogs' minds don't work that way. They adapt.

I feel that newly placed dogs escape so often because people underestimate the dog's desire to preserve a known environment, and how high the "flight risk" is during the transition period. It is the former owner/breeder/rescuer's responsibility to know this and make sure the new owner understands this and knows what precautions to take.

Every whippet requires a different amount of time to bond and adapt, anywhere from a few days to several weeks. In my experience it usually takes a week or so (that is, with a home where they get lots of attention and exercise, and not left alone too much). It is wise to continue taking extra precautions for as long as several months. Remember, the dog has no concept of geography. He may think that once he gets out of the yard, his old home will be right around the corner. A new owner must be assured that after the transition period, the whippet will be settled and happy and will act like a normal pet.

During the transition period, the whippet's personality and behavior may be unusual. Besides trying to get back home, he may display unusual traits, such as depression or anxiety. Reassure the new owner that this whippet will indeed be the same sweet whippet he's been before and to be patient and extra careful until he is settled in.

Some recommendations for new owners of rehomed adult whippets:

- Give extra attention, love and treats.
- Establish a consistent routine.
- Do not leave the whippet alone in the yard, even if you are home, at first.
- Even a whippet that has never dreamed of jumping a fence may panic and try this during the transition period.
- Stimulate his mind. Do some obedience and help establish yourself as alpha in a positive way.
- Be loving but firm and set clear boundaries. This builds confidence.
- Crate the dog if you are gone, even for a brief time. During the transition period, being alone can be very frightening.
- Take lots of long leash walks.
- Encourage lots of play and exercise in your yard.
- Use a comfortable, sturdy martingale style leash or collar that he cannot slip out of--especially at the airport! Keep the leash handle looped around your wrist, and grasp with your hand. Whippets can be surprisingly strong. No flexi-leads!

Adult Whippets in Transition

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- Keep the new dog on lead when outside the home, don't let him off lead even in a safe dog park until he is really bonded with you and has good recall.
- Be absolutely obsessive about doors and gates, especially where children are involved. Be in control of your household situation.
- Keep ID on your whippet at all times. Contact the breeder immediately if he gets lost.

Kim Otero

Wheatland Whippets