

Helping Shelter Dogs Develop Life Skills

By Sherry Woodard

Tara's run is a training facility at Best Friends that contains real-life equipment to help dogs become familiar with structures they'll encounter in a home once they're adopted. Because shelter dogs often come from backgrounds where they weren't taught social skills and many haven't lived in homes, this equipment helps them become ready to go on mobile adoptions and then successfully transition into living happily in homes. These structures can be built inexpensively by anyone handy with a hammer.

You don't have to build special equipment; you can use pre-existing stairs or ramps, for example. Start teaching these life skills in a calm environment free of distractions. You can then move on to practicing anywhere and everywhere to help dogs generalize.

Remember to keep training sessions fun by using praise, pets and treats to encourage the behavior you want.



Above: Stairs with backs go up to a walkway with different types of flooring, such as linoleum and tile. Anything new can be scary, so dogs who haven't lived in homes may need to get comfortable with stairs and different types of flooring.

Below: The other end of the training walkway. This side has stairs without backs. Some dogs refuse to start at this end because stairs without backs are more frightening. With practice, they will approach the walkway from both ends.





Many dogs need practice living in a house, so this structure helps dogs become comfortable with entering and exiting doorways, walking down a hallway, and walking on different types of flooring.

This structure helps to build a dog's confidence. While the dog is on lead, the lead can be put through the opening in the top and the dog can be encouraged to walk through.



The short table was designed to teach dogs to stay in one place. Dogs can be taught to sit, stay down and stay. It can also be used for handling and grooming.



Sherry Woodard is the animal behavior and training consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission.