By Ann Doyle-Anderson, St. Francis Rescue (Nacogdoches, Texas)

As a no-kill rescue, we’re extraordinarily privileged to have a luxury most city shelters do not have: time. What we describe below is both time and labor intensive, and none of it is particularly innovative: it’s just our way of helping special dogs feel—and therefore behave—like family dogs. The items we consider most important come first, but we’re going for a holistic approach, so everything on the list plays a part with all the dogs.

Here are our top ten tips for helping special dogs:

1. Vet check: It’s more than a pat-down and a heartworm test. Like most other rescues, over the years we’ve seen many alleged behavior problems turn out to have physiological causes. Can’t housetrain that dog? The chronic UTI could have something to do with it. Male cat keeps peeing all over the place? Diabetes has that effect on some of us. Dog is “hyper,” slobbers all over and “is a picky eater”? That abscess under the slab fracture of the molar could have something to do with it.

2. Movement: No matter what it takes, we try to get the dog to move. Whenever possible, we’ll get her up and out, get her walking, running, exploring. If she’s not mobile on her own, we’ll adjust and step up the mental challenges. We want her to know she can count on some exercise, even if it’s for a little while. Some of my fosters spend part of the day in runs, and visitors are surprised that the dogs go bouncing happily (and voluntarily) back into a kennel. Why? In part because they know they’re getting out again, and it’s going to be fun (see #3).

3. Engaging the brain: We spend a good bit of time observing a dog to see what gets a response. While we’re doing the exercise part, we throw in some challenges: we don’t set up a TTouch maze (easily made with PVC pipes) every time, but we weave them through trees up and down inclines, walk them over uneven terrain; just changing the route can make things more interesting. We give them toys, and watch what they do with them: Sundance’s barking fits subsided when he got his suspended tire. (See HSSP’s tip sheet on canine enrichment, also available online, for more.)
4. Training and reward: It doesn’t have to be Advanced Obedience. While we’re getting the dog out for exercise, we work in a few minutes of sit-down-stay-come here-kennel. We’ve noticed that abused dogs respond really well to having a set of behaviors that always gets human approval. We think “sit” is a dog’s best friend.

5. Consistency in all things: Many of our dogs have been living in chaos, and we figure it’s up to us to give them a world that makes sense. They should be able to count on a schedule, at the very least.

6. Nutrition: We feed them the best quality food we can afford. It’s cheap health insurance.

7. Re-evaluation: We reassess constantly. For example, we check out interactions with other dogs early on, but don’t let the first encounters become a diagnosis. Eleanor was so stressed that she appeared dog-aggressive for the first month; now she plays with three other dogs and shows good dogmanners when she meets a new one.

8. Buddies: If a dog is comfortable with other dogs, we make sure he has a friend. It often relaxes the dog, and can let adopters see the potential even in a very shy dog.

9. Assuming the dog’s point of view: We crawl into that dog-loo ourselves and look around. Is the opening facing a high-traffic, noisy area that makes the dog feel like he’s living in the middle of the freeway? Could we move the dog house? Could we block the dog’s view of the neighbor’s Beagle who drives him crazy by climbing up and down the fence?

10. Touch: We lay hands on the dogs every day. It doesn’t have to be TTouch or advanced canine massage, but we offer the dog human contact. Obviously, we have to work with how much togetherness the pup can stand at one time.

We consult veterinarians, dog trainers, TTouch practitioners, massage therapists and behaviorists, and we do it often. The way we look at it, all these professionals focus on some aspect of a dog’s wellbeing, and we need all of them.