



How I Gained The Trust Of My New Fearful Dog

Adapted from the original article by Samantha Erb (for BarkPost Magazine)

Four years, two months, and eight days ago, I drove an hour and a half into southern Delaware farm country to a little SPCA off the highway. When I arrived, I was irresistibly drawn to a dark-colored dog quivering in the far back corner. She was quiet in a sea of howling, barking canines. At the time, I didn't understand the challenge this posed. She was obviously underfed, unsocialized, and stiff as a board with fear, and I couldn't help but think she probably wouldn't make it in there much longer. Needless to say, that dog, now named Haley, came home with me that day.

Of course, there's a lot more to the story, but if you are like me and you've adopted a skittish, anxious, or fearful dog, there are some steps you need to take. ***Now is the time to brush up on your canine body language.***

The first days (or weeks or months...) at home give them their space.

You've just placed an already nervous dog into a strange home with strange smells. First things first, she needs a place to call her own. Set up a bed or crate in a quiet, low-traffic area so she always has someplace to wind down.

Next, and I know this is no fun for you or me, but you have to *ignore* her. No touching, no talking, no eye contact unless the dog comes to you or otherwise solicits your attention. It will be difficult to resist but if you force your attention and affection upon her, your fearful dog may very well learn to trust you less, rather than more. When you do talk, speak softly (uber inside voices here!). Put the TV on low, turn down the radio, and ask others to do the same. Sit down on the floor and angle yourself away to give your dog the opportunity to approach if she wants, and don't be disappointed if this doesn't happen immediately.

TREATS, TREATS, TREATS!

Find some high-value snacks that your dog loves, like pieces of chicken, hot dogs, or cheese if their stomach can handle it, and use them as rewards for any behaviors you see that you'd like to see again. Any tasty treat with a strong smell can work. Keep some on you at all times in case your dog comes near, and toss them gently in their direction or place on your open palm for them to take.

Try not to do the following:

Try not to shower her with pity.

Of course it's ok to be reassuring and comforting, but while it feels natural to protect by coddling, hugging, and constantly "baby talking" to your frightened pooch, that kind of close contact may feel like restraint to your dog. She needs to have enough autonomy in her new environment to be able to make decisions for herself about how much contact she can handle.

Try not to punish unwanted behavior.

Positive reinforcement is so important with fearful dogs. Obviously, they are scared for a reason, and even though you may not know why (I certainly didn't), there is no reason to increase it. Instead of scolding when they do something wrong, reward them instead for performing the behaviors you want. Accomplishing something successfully helps build a dog's confidence, and when you and your dog work together on new skills, you will be strengthening the bond that's forming between you.

Try not to push them too hard.

Timid dogs do what they want when they want, and you should let them. If they want to plant their furry butts on the ground on a walk, let them. Then use those yummy treats and a cheery "C'mon, let's go!" to get them moving again. Make sure your expectations are reasonable. Acclimating to a new environment can take a long time and it will work best if your dog is allowed to go through the process at her own pace.

Speaking of positive reinforcement...

Gentle praise and treats are just about the best thing in the world for most pups. Each time they overcome a fear or push themselves just a little bit further, treat and praise, treat and praise. Eventually, they will learn that their own confidence is a good thing! The more they're rewarded for particular behaviors, the more they'll repeat them, and the more they repeat them, the quicker they'll form new, confident habits.

When your dog is ready, take the time to teach her as many obedience and trick signals as you can. Make sure you're using force-free training methods to accomplish this task, of course! One sure way to improve and expand communication between you and your dog is to teach her the definitions of as many words as possible. The more words you share, the better she'll understand what's expected of her in a given situation.

There's no doubt that raising a shy dog is challenging. Some dogs will come out of their shells right away and adjust beautifully to family life, but others, like Haley, will take a bit more work. Almost five years later we are still working on our confident dog skills, but she is worlds away from where she started. If you've gotten this far, be warned that there is NOTHING better than watching your frightened rescue bloom into a happy, confident dog. Every second is worth it.