



## Adopting an Undersocialized, Fearful Dog

*Adapted from material originally posted on  
ASPCA Virtual Pet Behaviorist*

Frequently, dogs who've come from difficult situations like hoarding cases or puppy mills, haven't known any other environments. They aren't always prepared for the changes they're about to experience when they're rescued and are finally able to become someone's real friend. The process of teaching a dog like that to be comfortable in her new environment is called "acclimation," and though it is a tremendously rewarding process, it can pose some particular challenges as well. Trading a stark environment without enrichment or much attention from people at all for a colorful new world full of novel sights, sounds, and sensations can be tremendously overwhelming for your new dog. Helping her adjust may take a lot of patience and understanding.

Keep your new dog's history in mind as you help her adjust to her new, exciting life full of real love. She may have spent all of her time indoors, or even in a cage. She may not have had the opportunity to learn good housetraining skills even though she's an adult. She may never have had the chance to interact with people other than her caretakers, and it's possible that even they were unkind. Your dog's critical socialization period occurred when she was between seven and around twelve weeks old. If she didn't have the opportunity to experience lots of diverse sights, smells, sounds, places, and objects, it's likely she's going to find almost everything she encounters completely terrifying. It is important that you take things very slowly so she has time to adjust to her "new normal" and to develop trust in you and in her environment. Proceed slowly, deliberately, consistently. Allow your dog the opportunity to make her own choices about what she wants to explore and how much stimulation she can handle. Until you came along, she may have had no idea that a world outside her home (or her cage) even existed. Initially she may feel as confused and frightened by your home as you would feel if one day you awoke to find yourself on an unfamiliar planet. It may take your dog a long time to get used to these big changes but as her new guardian, you can calmly, patiently assure her that your home is not such a scary place after all, and that the people in it are true friends. If you maintain a consistent, predictable routine, and you give your dog the opportunity to make her own choices and proceed at her own pace, you'll reap tremendous rewards as you watch her overcome her fears.

### **What to Expect at First**

It's not uncommon for an unsocialized dog to hide under a couch or table for days or even weeks at a time, only coming out to eat and drink at night. Remember, the more patient and gentle you are, the faster your new dog will come around. It may mean exercising a great deal of self-control on your part, but resist the temptation to "show" your dog that new things are harmless by foisting them upon her! To be successful in helping a dog acclimate, you must let her proceed at her own pace. Here are some tips to start you off on the right foot:

- Give your new dog a crate covered with a blanket as a “safe haven.” Consider purchasing a plastic airline crate so you can remove the top half to retrieve her from inside rather than having to lean in and pull her out through the crate door.
- If your dog seems extremely fearful, you can set up a larger safe area by setting up an ex-pen in a corner of your home. Set her crate up on one end of the ex-pen with her water and food dishes nearby. On the other end, you can provide potty pads or another indoor housetraining tool.
- If you like, you can allow your dog to sleep beside your bed in her crate. This will help her get used to your presence and she can quietly bond with you while you both rest.
- Sometimes dogs who’ve spent their lives around lots of other dogs are more comfortable around canines than people. If you already have a friendly, outgoing dog, he may be a great comfort to your new dog, as well as a role model. After initial introductions, make sure that your dogs have opportunities to spend time together.
- If you don’t have another dog of your own, see if you can set up some times for your new dog to visit with a friend or family member’s friendly, outgoing dogs.
- Please do not throw a big “welcome home” party to celebrate your new dog’s arrival. Please do not try to “socialize” her by taking her with you everywhere you go. These are lovely ideas for dogs who have more normal histories but they’re both techniques that will overwhelm your unsocialized dog and cause her to shut down completely.

## **Introducing Your Dog to Friends and Family**

In time, your dog will bond strongly to her primary caretaker but she may remain fearful of strangers for a long time – perhaps forever. It’s your job to keep her safe from invasive human contact. Don’t let strangers you meet on the street pet her or pick her up unless she solicits that kind of attention from them on her own. If your dog learns that you’ll always keep her safe, she’ll build confidence and a sense of security more quickly.

When you bring new people into your home, you’ll find that it’s often easier to have guests play “hard to get” when meeting your new dog. A friendly human greeting can sometimes be interpreted by dogs as threatening. Have guests make themselves small by sitting or crouching. Instruct them to avoid eye contact and just let the dog approach if and when she feels comfortable enough to do so.

One great way to get to know a shy dog is to sit on the floor while reading a book, with treats scattered all around you. This way, the dog can approach as much as she likes and is repeatedly rewarded for her bravery.

## **To Comfort, or Not to Comfort?**

It’s not even a question! Some sources say that you should never comfort a shy dog because doing so will “reinforce” her fear. That is utter nonsense. Please do whatever it takes to make your dog feel as comfortable as possible in every single situation she encounters. Sometimes that may mean leaving her alone but other times it will surely require a soothing tone, loving attention, and other assistance from you.