



ADOPTING AN UNDERSOCIALIZED DOG

AAP frequently takes in dogs from puppy mills, and in all likelihood, these dogs have not been properly socialized. This can mean general shyness all the way to a dog that is terrified of any human contact. This addendum is intended to help educate our adoptive homes about the special needs and considerations of these dogs.

The following content has been taken from the ASPCA's website, and we recommend you check out other helpful content on their site (www.asPCA.org):

What Is a Puppy Mill?

Puppy mills are large-scale commercial dog-breeding operations where profit is given priority over the well-being of the dogs. Unlike responsible breeders, who place the utmost importance on producing the healthiest puppies possible, puppy mill owners disregard genetic quality. This often results in generations of dogs with hereditary defects, including dental abnormalities, eye problems and limb deformities. Legitimate breeders also put a lot of effort into giving puppies a good start in life by providing proper nutrition, veterinary attention and thorough socialization. Unfortunately, puppy mill dogs aren't so lucky. Puppy mills usually house dogs in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, without adequate veterinary care, food, water or socialization. The dogs don't get to experience treats, toys, exercise or basic grooming. To minimize waste cleanup, they're often kept in cages with wire flooring that injures their paws and legs—and it's not unusual for cages to be stacked in tall columns. Dogs used for breeding often spend their entire lives outdoors, exposed to the elements, or indoors, crammed inside filthy structures where they never get the chance to feel the sun or a gust of fresh air on their faces.

Challenges You Might Face with Your Puppy Mill Dog

Keeping your new dog's history in mind will prove useful as you help her adjust to her new life. Because she came from a puppy mill, she spent all of her time in a cage. She was forced to urinate and defecate in it, so she probably learned to lie in her own waste because no clean surfaces were available to sleep on. She probably never had the chance to interact with people other than her caretakers.

Because your puppy mill dog wasn't exposed to any new people, animals, sights, sounds or experiences during her critical socialization period (between three to twelve weeks of age), she'll likely act as though everything in the world is terrifying. Who can blame her? Until recently, she had no idea that a world outside of her cage existed. At first, your home will be a very strange and scary place—almost like another planet! Eliminating outside, wearing a harness and leash, going on walks and meeting strangers will all be new and potentially stressful experiences. It may take your dog a long time to get used to these big changes, especially if she's an older dog whose habits are well-formed. As her new pet parent, you'll need to calmly and patiently assure her that the world is not such a scary place and that you and other humans are worthy of her trust. If you take things slowly and go at her pace, you'll reap the reward of watching your shy dog overcome her fears.

What to Expect During Your First Days Together

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 puppy mill dog will come around. Here are some helpful tips to start you off on the right foot:

- Give your new dog a crate covered with a blanket as a "safe haven." If she seems fearful, choose a plastic crate instead of a metal one. If you need to take her out of the crate, you can simply remove the top of the crate instead of pulling her out through the crate door.
- If your dog seems extremely fearful, you can set up a "safe room." A kitchen, bathroom or laundry room works well for this purpose. To keep your dog in her safe area, you can use a baby gate or an exercise pen (a metal playpen for dogs, available at most pet stores). Put an open crate, food and water on one side of the room and some newspaper or a few potty pads on the other.
- When your dog isn't in her crate or safe room, it's a good idea to attach a lightweight leash to her harness and let her drag it around the house. If necessary, you can use the leash to get her out from under furniture if she hides. Letting your dog drag a leash will also help her get used to how the leash feels when it's attached to her harness, which may make on-leash walks easier.
- 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. If your dog is small, try putting the crate on a table near the bed so that she can easily see you.
- Because they're usually housed with other dogs all day and night, puppy mill dogs often trust new dogs before they trust new people. So if you already have a friendly, outgoing dog, he'll be a great comfort to your new dog, as well as a valuable role model. After initial introductions, make sure that your dogs have opportunities to spend time together. If you don't have another outgoing dog, try to borrow one from a friend or neighbor.

- Please do not have a big party to “socialize” your dog as soon as you bring her home. Give her at least a few days to bond with you and settle in before introducing her to strangers. When she seems more comfortable with you, she can start meeting new friends, one or two at a time, in quiet, familiar environments.

How to Help Your Dog Adjust to Her New Life

When most people picture life with a dog, they imagine long, scenic walks, parties with lots of friends and playing with other dogs at the dog park. These activities may be possible with your new dog someday, but please remember to be patient. It may take a while to get there.

Introducing the Leash Indoors

At first, most puppy mill dogs tend to panic and try to run home if you attempt to walk them on leash outside. This is why they need to be slowly introduced to leash-walking indoors before venturing out. ASPCA behavior experts have found that fearful shelter dogs tend to react better when their leash is attached to a body harness instead of a collar. Many unsocialized dogs panic and thrash around when they feel a collar tighten around their neck, and a harness is less likely to cause this reaction. Note: Please remember - leashes can only be attached to the AAP distributed martingale collar or an approved and fitted harness.

Allow your dog some time to get used to you and her new home before trying to attach the leash to her harness. When she seems comfortable with her new surroundings, take her and some delicious treats, such as chicken, cheese or liverwurst, to a quiet room. Gently attach the leash, and then immediately feed her a few tiny treats. Keeping the leash loose, start to slowly walk around the room. Continue to feed your dog treats as she follows and walks beside you.

The Great Outdoors

When you're sure your dog feels comfortable wearing a leash and harness indoors, you can start to gradually introduce her to the world outside. If she's small enough to be comfortable in a carrier, it may help to take her to a quiet place, like a nearby park. Then you can lift her out of the carrier and let her sit on your lap or explore while wearing her leash and harness.

After a few low-key trips to the park, you can try taking your dog on a walk. The following tips will help keep the new activity as stress-free as possible:

- Walking with another dog may increase your dog's confidence. Consider borrowing a neighbor's dog if you don't have one.
- Make sure that your dog's walking equipment is completely secure. If she gets frightened, she may try to back out of her collar or harness and escape. If your dog tolerates the feeling of a leash attached to her collar, you can try using two leashes for extra safety: one attached to her collar and the other attached to her harness.

Introducing Your Dog to Friends and Family

In time, your dog will likely bond strongly to her primary caretaker, but if she's an older puppy mill dog, there's a good chance that she'll 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. If your dog learns that you'll keep her safe, she'll be far less anxious on walks.

When you bring new people into your home, you'll find that it's often easier to have them play "hard to get" when meeting your shy, fearful dog. A friendly human greeting (direct gaze, leaning over, reaching with hands) is actually quite threatening in dog language. Instead, have guests make themselves small by sitting or crouching, avoid eye contact and just let your dog approach on her own when she's feeling comfortable.

One great way to get to know a shy dog is to sit on the floor while reading a book and scatter treats all around you. This way, the dog can approach as much as she likes and is repeatedly rewarded for her bravery. Have willing friends and family try this technique. When a person wants to meet your dog, ask him not to pet your dog until she looks completely comfortable and seems eager for him to touch her. If he rushes things, he could undo all your hard work! When your dog will readily take treats from the person's hand, he can try a gentle scratch on the chest and, if your dog still seems at ease, work up to scratching under her collar. These are non-threatening gestures to most dogs.

Training a Shy Puppy Mill Dog

Did you know that yawning, looking away and lip licking are signs that a dog is worried? If your dog shrinks away from something she encounters, try associating that thing with her favorite treat or toy, over and over, until she's no longer scared. For example, if your dog is afraid of traffic, go to a quiet park where you can see cars far away. Right after each car goes by, give your dog a tiny piece of chicken or cheese. (Don't feed her treats at any other time during training. She should only get the goodies right after she notices a car.) When your dog eagerly looks up at you for her treat the moment she sees a car appear, you can move a little closer to the road and continue training. As long as your dog stays relaxed, move a little closer each day. You can do the same thing if your dog is afraid of strangers, with treats coming from you at first. (Your dog doesn't have to receive treats from strangers for this procedure to work. As soon as she sees an unfamiliar person, you give her a treat. With consistent repetition, she'll still associate the treats with the appearance of strangers.)

Some sources say that you should never comfort a shy dog because doing so will "reinforce" the fear. This is nonsense. Please go ahead and do whatever it takes to make your dog more comfortable! Some dogs take great comfort from human contact, and if gentle petting helps your dog calm down when she's anxious, feel free to pet her. If she's becoming more confident, you're doing the right thing.