

Socializing an Adult Rescue

The field of applied dog behavior is replete with disagreement on every topic. Every topic but one: socialization. Everybody agrees that the highest priority when you acquire a puppy is socialization. Get the puppy out to experience sights, sounds, people and dogs so that, as an adult, he's comfortable and relaxed around strangers and in novel surroundings. There is also good agreement that, between the socialization mandate and training, puppies are time-intensive, to the point that people with jobs outside the home are encouraged to get adult dogs. Couple this with the desire to save a life, and the net effect is a lot of conscientious people with adult dogs from shelters and rescue groups. So, what's the deal on socialization now? Do you need to maintain it? What if you've adopted and your new dog is shy or skittish – or defensive – around people? Is it a lost cause? If not, what can you do?

Most dogs who are shy around new people – and even those who are specifically hand-shy, head-ducking when reached for – are the way they are through errors of omission rather than commission. Fearfulness is a genetic default setting in animals that has been shaped over eons, and that domestication has softened but not eliminated. Erring on the side of avoiding new things served the ancestors of all dogs very well. We can push back against fearfulness in two ways: genetics and environment. If we cease pushing back, default fearfulness will reemerge, which is why shyness and fear-aggression is so prevalent. So, while it's possible a shy dog has had traumatic experiences, such a history is far from necessary to produce fear. In fact, this is why socialization of puppies is such a high priority endeavor.

Play it Safe and Gather Information

When you bring a new dog home, don't take it for granted that he will be friendly to all people, even if he took to you on your first meeting. Socialization is specific: dogs who are comfortable around adults are not necessarily well-socialized to children, and dogs who like women won't necessarily like men. So gather intell while playing it safe around new people. The rule is this: nobody should reach for or touch your dog if your dog hasn't moseyed up to them first. This is called "pro-social" behavior, and is in contrast to anti-social behavior (frank fight or flight) and the less obvious "asocial" behavior, which is a dog giving you no read: no wagging and approaching but no fight or flight either. Still waters running deep. Careful.

If your new rescue dog is pro-social to all groups, first celebrate – this is quite glorious – and, second, think maintenance. Get him out regularly, and avoid bad experiences. Some dogs do "de-socialize" if they are allowed to get rusty. And a really bad experience – think a self-proclaimed expert alpha-rolling your new kid – can create a lifelong fear in an instant.

If he's not pro-social to all groups, then the fight-flight-still-waters details come into play. If he's frankly aggressive, don't despair, as this is no longer a death-sentence. But you do need good professional help, so engage a competent trainer or veterinary behaviorist to get you on a therapeutic regime. Professional help is also good if he's an offense-as-defense kid. But because the moral and legal stakes are not so high here, DIY training is an option.

How to Socialize a Spooky New Dog

The technique of choice is classical conditioning: associate the presence of people with incredible snacks, something the dog never, ever gets except when strangers are around. Shoot for a 1:1 ratio between strangers and the super-high value treat. Maintaining a 1:1 ratio means not missing opportunities, and this is the hard bit. However well-intentioned you are, and however much you understand classical conditioning in theory, you need a practical system to ensure you're always armed with diced chicken or pecorino Romano cheese when there's a situation where the dog might encounter strangers. Prep zip-lock baggies full of ammo. Put some in the fridge and some in the freezer so you're never caught without. You could also have freeze-dried liver or dried chicken strips in a bag that lives with the poop pick-up bags or the leash, as a back-up plan. It's that important to be armed all the time.

The Right to Say No

Some dogs are "asocial" - no frank fight or flight, just no interest in people, that is until they get too close. If anyone makes a move to reach for or touch your asocial dog, slow them down, which may take a bit of doing. People are notorious about thinking they are "good with dogs" and may ignore your instructions. The worst case scenario if you don't keep a dog whisperer at bay is a reach forcing your uncomfortable dog to aggress, which will indeed work like a charm to back the person off. And so he learns in one trial that offense *does* work as defense. Much better if *you* keep the person at bay tossing or hand-feeding treats without any attempts at patting. If your dog wants contact with the person, he'll vote with his feet. All dogs have the right to say "no" and we want them doing this without their teeth. To keep your dog on the road to believing the world is in fact a safe place, prove to him that people don't make contact unless he initiates it. Empower him to have the choice.

Confidence Building Activities

The best one is reward-based training. Even if he's a model dog and doesn't need training, train him anyway. Enroll in a non-force method obedience course, or a tricks class. Or get hold of one of the wonderful, accessible books on clicker training, such as Karen Pryor's "Don't Shoot the Dog!" and shape tricks in your living room. It doesn't matter if you're not much of a trainer, as we're after the process of training here, rather than the product. Another great activity is playing with the dog using his toys. If he doesn't seem to be much of a fetcher or tugger on the face of it, don't give up. Persevere at trying to engage him. Finally, work-to-eat endeavors are excellent for behavioral wellness. A huge variety of sophisticated puzzle toys now exist that can accommodate part or even all of his daily meal ration. Dogs are descended from wolves, who are consummate problem-solving predators, and free food in a bowl is against the grain.

The Prognosis

With good management, which means protecting them from those pushy people, shy dogs tend to continue making gradual improvements over the course of their lives. With classical conditioning treatment, the pace is accelerated and the ceiling (best outcome) is a dog who actively likes strangers rather than tolerates them.