

First Days Home with a Shy Dog

All newly adopted dogs need to be taught what they can chew, how they may greet you, where to go to the bathroom and other house rules. If your adopted dog is afraid of novel people or new situations, he will also need some extra help from you to adjust to his new home. In the hands of a patient and caring owner, a shy dog can be a great companion and can make gains in confidence over time.

Avoiding Coercion

First impressions are lasting, so, when you first arrive home, make sure the dog isn't forced into any scary situations. As tempting as it might be to give him hugs, scrub him in the bath, take him to people's houses or invite over all your friends, it is much wiser to let him explore his immediate surroundings while you sit quietly, waiting for him to come to you when he is ready. When he does approach you, he may still be wary of your hands or of being touched. Be patient – physical contact is the hardest part for some – the best way to win his trust is to not rush him.

Hand-Feeding

A great idea is to hand feed him treats and/or meals. At first, talk to him while you feed him piece by piece. After a session or two, try touching him with your other hand before each treat. If he moves away, go back to feeding him without touches a few more times and then try a smaller touch before feeding. If he is extremely fearful and hides for a long time once you get home, you can toss treats near to where he is hiding and then leave him alone. Once he feels better, he'll venture out and associate it with getting a tasty treat. In time, his forays out will happen sooner and sooner after you toss treats and your presence will become associated with the treats as well. Once he is out, you can switch to hand feeding.

Finding Safe Distances

Take walks around the neighborhood and let him sniff and thoroughly check things out. Sudden noises or changes in the environment will likely make him flatten or try to run for cover. Your best policy is to let him hide or to take him further away from the scary situation. Then, once he settles down, encourage him to approach as close as he is comfortable to what frightened him. Feed him a few treats and then leave. Also be careful of people who think they are "good with dogs" and then try to approach him too quickly or too close. Being forced into more than he can handle is never therapeutic and can even make him worse. Take the initiative to coach people on how to remain passive and let the dog set the pace of contact. A good idea is to carry treats for people to toss to him – if he won't eat, it's a sign that he needs even more distance. Get him far enough away so that he's relaxed enough to eat as this helps him develop a positive association to new people.

Other Considerations

Shy dogs are no less prone to developing separation anxiety than other dogs. Be sure to do many brief absences in the first few days so he learns that you are not always there

and that whenever you leave, you come back. Exit and entry in a very matter of fact way and leave him in a dog-proofed room with plenty of chew toys. Shy dogs warm up and bond strongly to people they live with within days or weeks but remain nervous around novel people. The time it takes to warm up to a new person may accelerate over time – whereas early on, it took dozens of visits from a certain person before that person was accepted into the dog’s circle, later the dog is comfortable with a new person after half a dozen exposures. This process usually takes years, with attention paid to never rushing the dog as well as effort at creating positive associations. So, in the early days with your shy dog, don’t become frustrated if it seems he is taking a long time to warm up to your friends.

Some Confidence Building Activities

Positive experiences with what frightens him at an intensity he can handle is the best way to build up a shy dog. Here are a few other suggestions that often help:

- Free-shaping tricks and new behaviors using a clicker
- Dog-dog play
- Tug of war – provided you have learned and know how to enforce the rules
- Agility training or other training classes

Courtesy of The San Francisco SPCA Behavior and Training Department