

First Days with a Shy Dog

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: 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 and let him sniff and thoroughly check things out. Sudden noises or changes in the environment will 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. Once he settles down, let him approach as close as he is comfortable to what frightened him. Feed him a few treats and then leave.

Be especially 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.

Shy dogs warm up and bond strongly to people they live with 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. So, in the early days, don't become frustrated if it seems he is taking a long time to warm up to people.

Shy Dogs

Fearful dogs avoid people or things that frighten them, and may do a barking display to make what they're afraid of go away. If you've decided to share your life with a shy dog, take heart. With patience, you can build his confidence.

Different Kinds of Shyness

The most common kinds of shyness in dogs are:

Social shyness, where the dog is fearful of unfamiliar people. Dogs like this are sometimes described as "taking a while to warm up," "one man dogs" or "protective." They are usually fine with a person once they get to know them. Examples are dogs who are afraid of men or children, or bark at people with unusual gaits.

Context fears, where the dog is afraid of certain kinds of situations. Examples are dogs who are vet-phobic, panic during car rides or are uncomfortable in new places.

Sound sensitivities, where the dog is afraid of loud noises. They flatten and try to escape when a car backfires, or pace and salivate during thunderstorms or fireworks.

Why Is He Like This?

Fear is common in animals. Although it's possible that a fearful dog has suffered abuse or a bad experience, most fear results from a combination of a genetic predisposition and some lack of experience in the first weeks of life. A dog may have missed becoming *socialized* to new people by simply not being around them enough when he was a puppy.

Will He Get Better?

Most fearful dogs can be helped to gradually improve. This is a slow process in most cases and requires patience. Shy dogs are not for everybody. They need people who have compassion and patience.

The best thing is to expose him to what frightens him but at a ***milder intensity*** and combined with a ***positive association***. A dog who is afraid of children might start to feel comfortable if he regularly sees children but at a distance where he doesn't feel worried. If you pat him and give him treats, he will start to see kids as good news: "Wow, great things happen to me when kids are around!" Dogs learn strongly from association.

How Can I Help Him Settle in to His New Home?

The best strategy is to let the dog go at his own pace. Any kind of pressure or coercion to make contact makes things worse. Let the dog hide if he needs to, investigate things and come to you when he feels ready. Make the world safe for him and he'll improve.