



DOGS WITH SOCIALIZATION & FEAR ISSUES

WHAT GOES INTO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A STABLE, WELL-ADJUSTED, HAPPY DOG?

One frequent topic of discussion among dog rescue people and owners is socialization – what it is, when and how to do it, and its importance in the development of a well-adjusted dog. Rescues and shelters often take in dogs with fear and confidence issues and work to improve socialization skills to improve their chances of adoption. People who foster or adopt dogs with under-socialization and fear issues may assume that the dog has been emotionally or physically abused because of its behavior – cowering; fear of people, especially men; anxiety; tendency to bolt away; avoiding eye contact; voiding; belly crawls; growls, etc.

We often hear the phrase “critical period of socialization” in relation to puppies. This period ranges from 3 to 16 weeks depending on the breed of the dog. During this “window of opportunity,” breeders and owners expose puppies to new things, sounds, people, and experiences which allows the pups to develop a healthy interest in the world around them. Between 3-8 weeks, puppies are socializing with their littermates, and from 8-16 weeks, puppies are socializing with new people and things in their environment.

However, socialization is only one factor that influences the development of a puppy into a stable, well-adjusted, happy dog. Jessie Shipe, a Licensed Veterinary Technician with a Specialty in Behavior a Certified Trainer with the Karen Pryor Academy, and a staff member at the Animal Behavior Wellness Center in Fairfax, VA, describes factors other than socialization that can and do affect the development of a stable, well-adjusted dog (refer to Jessie’s Webinar cited in Resources section at end)

- **Genetics** has a major influence on a dog’s socialization, estimated between 30-60% depending on the source you consult. Whether the actual percentage of the influence is 30%, 60% or somewhere in between for a particular dog, genetics influences whether a dog has a predisposition to being fearful; anxious, timid, or aggressive, or being well-adjusted, stable, and happy. Interestingly, pups from the same litter may have different personalities, much like children in a family.
- **Ontogenics**, defined as all the things that happen to a dog during conception, and pregnancy including the stress level of the dam and nutritional deficits, is an important contributor to a dog’s stability, well-being, and happiness.

- **Maternal behavior** also influences a dog's development. Female dogs can be excellent moms, but they also can fail to give their pups positive attention or teach them doggy life skills.
- **Learning history** or exposure to life experiences also plays a role in a dog's overall stability. Do they have a history of more positive or negative experiences?
- **Trauma** also can impact a dog's overall development. Emerging research is focusing on the neurobiology of a dog who has been through trauma, the impact of trauma on physical and psychological development, and trauma-informed treatment models that help dogs feel safe.
- **Socialization** also is a critical part of dog's development into a stable, well-adjusted happy dog, but it is only one piece of the developmental journey.

One important thing to note: If you look at the list of factors affecting a dog's development, most are things over which the foster or adopter has no control. This means that an important part of working with our rescue dogs is working on the things we can influence. Reducing a dog's fears does not happen quickly and is a journey.

UNDER-SOCIALIZATION

Sometimes AGK takes in orphans who are under-socialized, fearful, and timid. These dogs usually present common behaviors that may concern and even frustrate fosters and adopters. Sometimes people assume that fearful dogs have been abused because of their body language and actions – for example, jumping/bolting away from petting or touching, tucking their tails, unable to make eye contact, shaking, nervous peeing or pooping. People also sometimes conclude that a man has abused these dogs because they often are afraid of men. However, the fear of men may not be based on abuse but rather on the fact that men are large and tall, loud, and frequently stand over a dog in a dominant stance.

While some AGK orphans have suffered mental or physical abuse in their past lives, most of the dogs that we see in the rescue with these behaviors have not been abused; rather, they are under-socialized. These dogs may have been influenced by the factors described above (genetics, ontogenics, maternal behavior, trauma, and learning history). We see dogs who have lived outside in a pen or yard where they rarely interacted with the family; crated all day while the family was away; rarely exposed to other people, dogs, sounds, and experiences; others were not well socialized during the critical puppy socialization period. Puppy mills tend to produce under-socialized and fearful dogs. Working with a mentor dog, positive reinforcement training, socialization, time, and anxiety medications can help, these approaches may not completely remove all the fear and under-socialization issues of adult dogs. In most cases, however, these dogs can become much loved members of the family who work to understand their issues and address them in a positive way.

HOW DOES A DOG SHOW UNDER-SOCIALIZATION ISSUES & FEAR?

In general, a dog will show fear and under-socialization by four types of responses to new people and situations:

- Fidget – dog moves/walks away; lifts paw; licks lips; pins ears back; or offer displacement behaviors to create peace and avoid conflict; is hyperactive; increased panting, excessive jumping.
- Freeze – dog will not move, blink, or make eye contact, goes to ground on belly.
- Flight – dog bolts away and is difficult to catch.
- Fight – dog growls, shows teeth, bites, and/or lunges.

These responses are not necessarily exclusive; a dog may show more than one response. DO NOT push dogs who are in one of these four response modes.

GETTING READY FOR A DOG WITH UNDER-SOCIALIZATION & FEAR ISSUES

Most experts agree that the best first step to help dogs with under-socialization and fear issues is to place them in a home with a mentor dog, a confident dog they can watch and follow. Delaware Valley Golden Retriever Rescue has a large program devoted to dogs with under-socialization and fear issues because they receive over 100 dogs per year from Amish puppy mills. The DVGRR document, *Mentor Dogs and Their Role in Adoption*, offers helpful information about how mentor dogs can help with the transition of an under-socialized and fearful dog in a foster home as well as an adoptive home - https://www.dvgr.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Education_Puppy-Mills_mentor-dogs-and-their-role-in-adoption.pdf.

Expect a dog with under-socialization and fear issues to be afraid of you initially. No matter how bad a situation they were in previously, it was the only situation they knew. The process of being removed from that situation may be scary - going to a vet (often for the first time in their lives), then to a foster home and eventually an adoptive home - multiple transitions with new people, sounds, places, and other dogs. Understand that the dog is not deliberately ignoring you or trying to frustrate you. They are doing the best they can. It takes time to build trust. If something is not working, take deep breaths and realize that you need to use a different approach.

Manage expectations – Fearful and under-socialized dogs may not want affection and petting initially. In fact, touch can be very scary – almost painful - to them. They may not climb on the couch initially and snuggle with you or come up to you for attention. Often, these behaviors will happen eventually – though not always – but rarely in the beginning.

Commit to being very patient. Expect the dog to be afraid of new things and situations and to show that fear in diverse ways.

Make a safe place for the dog – where they can retreat when life is too hard. Crates make excellent safe places, as do laundry rooms, bedrooms, etc. The dog needs to know that when it goes to “place,” it will be safe and not bothered. If you have children, spouse, or friends, do not let them try to pet the dog or make it interact when it is in its safe place. The safe place can be in another room, or in the general area of home activity, but it needs to be a place where the dog can retreat and decompress - not be

approached or challenged. Give the dog the option to come out of the safe place when it is ready. Always refer to the safe place as “place” so that you can tell the dog to go to “place” if needed.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Common behaviors you will see in dogs with fear and under-socialization issues include:

- Fear of stairs – teach them to go up the stairs first – then down. Use the mentor dog, high value treats and verbal encouragement. If stairs are slick, you may need to use stair runners or treads.
- Fear of a leash or harness.
- Unfounded fears of things most dogs see as normal – unexpected and loud noises such as dropping a dog bowl, having to step on something other than grass or dirt (a rock pathway), balloons, bicycles, motorcycles, etc.
- Difficulty with transitions – going through doorways, going from outside to inside. Again, use the leadership of the mentor dog and high value treats to help with transitions. Always keep the dog on a leash or in a harness for the first couple of weeks – preferably at least a month, even if you have a physical fence - until you know it will follow the mentor dog or you or if will jump or climb your fence. It is much easier to leash a dog with socialization issues than it is to try to catch it when it bolts out your door or jumps your fence.
- Difficulty peeing or pooping on leash. The dog may have always lived outside and not been close to a person when doing its business. If necessary, use a long leash or tie several leashes together. Also, always take it to the same place in the yard to do go to the bathroom.
- Little or no interest in toys or treats. This behavior will get better with time. Watching a mentor dog play with toys or take treats from your hand are also helpful strategies.
- Fear pee and poop – clean it up with enzyme cleaner available from pet store or white vinegar - without scolding - and take dog outside and show it where to go. In general, you should take dogs to pee and poop in the same area. If you take the under-socialized and fearful dog to the place where the mentor dog pees and poops, it will associate the smells with where it needs to go. You might consider hanging a bell by your door and ringing the bell every time you take the dog out to pee and poop. This action will train the dog in a way to communicate to you that it needs to go out.
- Turns away from you – avoids touch and eye contact.

THINGS TO TRY IN THE BEGINNING

- Keep dog in smaller space at first in the house and expand its boundaries as it gets more comfortable.
- Do not let dog off leash in yard for at least a month until you know if will jump or climb your fence and that you can get it back inside.
- Assume that the dog will bolt if you open the door. If you do not have a fenced-in yard, make sure the dog is secure in the home in a crate or closed off in another area of the home before you open the door.
- Keep dog close to all the activities of the house so it can choose to participate when it is comfortable (ex: if mentor dog is getting treats, dog with under-socialization and fear issues may join mentor dog if its safe place is where it can see the mentor dog; if you are playing with mentor dog, especially using silly, high pitched voice, an under-socialized dogs with fear issues may join you if it is watching.) This technique may require you to leave the bedroom door open if the safe place is in the bedroom. Or place the crate in the family room but to the side of the activity – this lets the dog observe and participate when it can, but also to be safe and removed from the activities when it needs to decompress.
- Train the dog to use the “Touch” command. This command is useful for so many things. You can find many websites that explain how to teach this command – here is one: <https://positively.com/dog-behavior/basic-cues/hand-target-training/>. Once perfected, this command can help the under-socialized fearful dog to touch new things.
- If a dog with fear and under-socialization issues approaches you, rub its chest instead of its head initially. When it pulls away, do not try to reach after it. Let it be in control of the touch process.
- Stand to the side or get down on the floor or ground at the dog’s level – do not stand over it. Sitting on the floor or ground is also helpful.
- Do not stare at the dog – it is ok to make eye contact as needed, but no direct stares.
- If the dog is very scared, try feeding the mentor dog canned food or a high value treat from your hand – with mentor dog close by, the under-socialized and fearful dog may decide to share in the goodies. You can also sit on the floor and toss high value treats away from you without making eye contact.
- If dog is afraid to come out of the crate, sit a little distance away and toss high value treats – into the crate at first and then gradually farther back as the dog begins to leave the crate.

- If dog is a leash puller, get an Easy Walk Harness or a Sporn No Pull Harness.
- Do not host loud gatherings with new people (football game party, family reunion for ex).
- Routine is especially important to under-socialized dogs with fear issues. In the beginning, try to keep their routine the same – when they get up, when they eat, when they go out, etc.
- If the dog walks on a leash or harness, daily walks with the mentor dog are effective ways to begin the socialization process – new smells, sights, and sounds. You may double leash the dog for safety in case any new things are very scary, and you get a bolt reaction. Using a slip lead with an existing collar or harness and regular leash also helps prevent the dog from escaping from a leash.
- All dogs, but particularly those with under-socialization issues, respond very well to clicker training. If you know how to clicker train, try it with patience and see if your dog responds. If you are no familiar with clicker training, contact a positive reinforcement trainer to help you learn how to use the clicker training or watch some Karen Pryor videos - <https://karenpryoracademy.com/about/>

ANXIETY

Dogs can develop anxiety issues for a variety of reasons – often when left alone and not socialized. Anxiety is also common in dogs who have gone through trauma or been abandoned. We also see anxiety develop from a change in routine, environment, or activity (such as moving from the only home they have known to a foster home or adoptive home).

Anxiety in dogs takes four forms: separation anxiety, generalized anxiety, environmental anxiety, and social anxiety. Based on research, we know that these four types of anxiety have multiple causes and can occur in conjunction with each other. Not surprisingly, anxiety issues are common in under-socialized and fearful dogs.

Pay attention to your dog’s body language. They cannot have a verbal conversation with you, but they can tell you much through their body language.

- Excessive barking
- Being over-reactive
- Not being interested in food
- Panting
- Pacing or general restlessness
- Whining
- Ears back and/or tail tucked.
- Shaking or trembling
- Drooling
- Aggression

- Urinating or defecating in the house
- Destructive behavior (tearing up furniture, chewing walls, eating remotes, etc.)
- Repetitive or compulsive behaviors
- Constantly looking for an escape (fight or flight)
- Digging or trying to escape enclosures.

Always talk to your vet first to rule out any medical issues that may be the cause of these behaviors. If there are no medical issues, then identify options for helping your dog cope with its anxiety. Please refer to this Blog from the Animal Surgical and Orthopedic Center in Shoreline, WA for more information on options to help your dog relax and handle its anxiety:

<https://www.animalsurgical.com/anxiety-in-dogs/> . Note, these options may include professional help. In addition, some dogs with anxiety respond well to the use of a thunder shirt - <https://thisis.dog/en/dog-stuff/thundershirts-dogs/>.

One tool for dogs with anxiety is desensitization and counterconditioning. Unless you are trained in how to use desensitization and counterconditioning, it will be helpful to find a trainer who can help you and your dog get started in using the technique correctly. Important: The desensitization and counter-conditioning method NEVER uses punishment, and timing is critical. Two links that provide more information.

- <https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/training/changing-your-dogs-behavior-with-desensitization-and-counter-conditioning/>.
- <https://www.thesprucepets.com/desensitization-and-counter-conditioning-dog-training-7368763>

If the dog has separation anxiety, using a KONG classic dog toy be helpful. KONGS are rubberized toys, resistant to mega-chewers, which are stuffed with a dog's favorite treats and then frozen. This toy usually keeps dogs' content and occupied while they work to remove all the good stuff, particularly helpful for dogs with separation anxiety. Once dogs remove the contents of the KONG, they can use the toy for bounce play. KONG provides recipes on its website to create variety in the stuffing and has other durable toys in its product line. <https://www.kongcompany.com/>

Calming collars also work for some dogs with under-socialization and fear issues. There are several brands on the market sold by vets, online and in stores. Check with your vet for a recommendation on which collar might work best for your dog. These collars release pheromones on the dog's skin which can have a calming effect.

Dog owners also use cannabidiol (CBD) oils, treats and chews to help dogs with anxiety issues. Currently, there are no industrywide standards for manufacturing or dosing of CBD products for dogs with anxiety. For this reason, we recommend that you discuss any CBD product with your veterinarian if you are considering giving it to your dog.

MEDICATION

Medication is not a magic cure for dogs with under-socialization/fear/anxiety issues, but it can help the dog decrease the anxiety below their fear threshold, so that the dog is receptive to training and

socialization. If your foster or adopted dog is not making progress after a month or so, you should discuss the pros and cons of anxiety medication with your vet.. If you live close to Knoxville, your vet may refer you to Dr. Julie Albright at the University of Tennessee Vet School, one of 80+ board-certified veterinary behaviorists in the United States. Dr. Albright will help you develop a plan that addresses the under-socialization and fear issues through both medication (if needed) and training. She also can recommend trainers who use positive reinforcement. It usually takes about a month to get an appointment with Dr. Albright, and you must fill out a history form on the dog (vmcbehavior@utk.edu, 865-974-8387).

ADOPTIVE HOMES FOR DOGS WITH SOCIALIZATION & FEAR ISSUES

Adopters should have a confident mentor dog in the home; a secure physical fence if the dog has “flight” response to its fears; and realistic expectations about what the dog needs and likes (dog may avoid petting and snuggling initially; may not do well around children who often make sudden, unexpected moves). Also, in most cases, a shelter or rescue should not adopt two dogs with under-socialization and fear issues to a home at the same time, especially if the home does not have a confident mentor dog.

The adopter’s selection of a trainer is a critical decision for any dog, but especially important for an under-socialized and fearful dog. Kathy Madson, MA, FDM, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, offers excellent advice on training for under-socialized and fearful dogs:

“All dog trainers are not the same, and neither are training methods. Even with “normal” dogs and in normal situations, [dominance- or correction-based training methods are not a good option](#). But this is even more so the case when it comes to helping previously under-socialized dogs get more comfortable in the world.

These situations, even more so than “normal” situations, are not helped by dominating, forcing, or creating pain or increased anxiety in a dog. Such methods will only make matters worse. Only work with trainers whose methods are based on sound behavioral science, typically referred to as “rewards-based,” “R+,” or “force-free” trainers. You and your dog will be much happier using their services and approach. Find out [what to ask a dog trainer \(and what their answers should be\) here](#).

Another helpful link to find a rewards-based trainer: <https://karenpryoracademy.com/find-a-trainer/#!directory/map>.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

A helpful online webinar offered by Jessy Schipe, a Licensed Veterinary Technician with a Specialty in Behavior, and a Certified Trainer with the Karen Pryor Academy. Jessie works at the Animal Behavior Wellness Center in Fairfax, VA. Her mission is to find ways to help incredibly stressed dogs (and cats) integrate and function successfully in the very scary world around them. The webinar is an hour long but you can watch short sections, take a break, and come back to it at a later time: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBRQFaNX-to>

Other Links:

<https://www.preventivevet.com/dogs/how-to-help-adult-dog-with-socialization>

<https://www.dvgrr.org/education/puppy-mills/>

https://www.dvgrr.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Education_Puppy-Mills_mentor-dogs-and-their-role-in-adoption.pdf

<https://www.animalsurgical.com/anxiety-in-dogs/>

<https://www.whole-dog-journal.com/behavior/fear-confidence/are-dogs-more-fearful-than-they-used-to-be/>

<https://positively.com/contributors/the-first-step-to-take-to-help-a-fearful-dog/>

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