

Working with a Shy Dog

I watch the public at our adoption days, stare the dogs in the eyes, stick their hands out at them, make high-pitched noises, and then recoil in shock when one of the less socialized dogs lets out a low growl.

I never over-correct the growl because it does its job: it makes the human stop. Growling is how the dog lets you know he is not comfortable. If you train out the growl, you train out the warning signal.

Rescue receives calls about dogs in shelters for several reasons, one of which is that the dog is “shut down,” meaning he is not responding well to being there and/or to people, and may be hiding in a corner. Anyone spending time in a shelter fully understands this behavior and knows it takes some extra work.

When working with a shy dog, patience is the most important thing. These dogs may have gone from a backyard to the shelter and never known any other place in their life. They may have only known one or two people.

You need to build a trusting relationship with the dog to be its safety net. You need to slowly introduce him to things in a positive, rewarding manner. You need to be the one he returns to if he is worried. He should not be allowed to take things into his own hands (paws). Shy, frightened dogs are more prone to bite than aggressive dogs.

Introductions to people should be with your friends and family, those who can hear the directions you give them about the dog and follow through accordingly. Start with the dog on leash with you, have the person approach, not staring the dog in the eyes, and drop a few treats on the ground. Hold a casual conversation without giving the dog too much attention. If he eats the treats, have the person drop a few more. If he approaches the person, have them glance at him and speak quietly. If the dog is comfortable, have the person reach out a palm with a treat in it. If the dog takes it, that’s wonderful, and then stop. If the dog does not approach, drop the treats on the ground, and then stop. Bigger steps can be taken at another time.

When taking them somewhere new, have a plan. Be able to escape if he is overwhelmed. This is why some of our dogs are excused from Adoption Days early; enough is enough. Go places, try things out, let him sniff and explore. Be there for him.

Let confidence flow down the leash. You need to be secure in the situation; the dog will read that in you. I never say “Oh, poor baby!” to the dog. I say, “Dude, it's cool, it’s just a trash can.” If I am not worried about the object, he does not need to be. Let him approach the item if he wants. I have taught dogs to “Check it” when approaching something novel, letting them know that it's safe to check out.

Never force a dog forward into a situation or at a person if you can avoid it. This will ruin the trust he has in you and may make him react strongly in a physical way.

It is a very human behavior to keep pushing situations, especially if they seem to be going well.

When working with a shy dog, one of the biggest rewards you can give is to take off pressure; pressure from strangers, from situations, and from the leash. Work in moments. Reward confident behavior. Take many small, successful steps, and give plenty of breaks.

Karen Oliver

Bring Rover Over

11/16/2025

