

Be Bold But Not Too Bold

Your shy guy needs nonthreatening coaching
by Pat Miller

As I walked across the front lobby of the shelter, my eyes were drawn to the well-behaved, sleek, black, 3-month-old Labrador puppy sitting beneath the table where his owners were filling out surrender paperwork.

"What an unusually calm Lab puppy," I thought as I approached. "I wonder why they're giving him up." As I got closer, however, and saw the expression in the young dog's eyes, I realized what I had mistaken from a distance for calmness was actually fear. When I knelt down to pet him, he shrunk behind his owner's legs, and his fearful expression intensified – totally out of character for a Labrador.

Dunkin's family was giving him up because he was doing normal puppy things in the back yard – digging, chewing, barking – and acting aggressively toward strangers. Dunkin's shyness was a result

of his breeder's and family's failure to socialize. If we couldn't instill some confidence in him, and quickly, his future at this shelter – at most shelters – would not be bright.

The most critical period for socialization in a young dog is between the ages of 4 weeks to 4 months. During this time, a puppy learns what is good and safe in the

world. How well he learns his socialization lessons depends on two factors: genetics and environment.

If a puppy has the good fortune to be born with genes for a bold, confident personality, he'll require less socialization than a puppy born with genes for a timid temperament. If those two pups receive average socialization, the bold pup will turn out fine, while the timid one will be a

problem. With the owner providing above average socialization, the bold pup will again be fine, and the timid puppy may, or may not. It depends upon how seriously flawed his genetic inheritance.

If both pups receive little to no socialization, chances are good that both will grow up with serious behavior problems, although the genetically brave puppy might still be a better candidate for some level of rehabilitation.

Of course, when you see a pup in a box outside a grocery store or in the puppy pen at your local shelter, you have no way of knowing his genetic makeup. Even if you get your puppy from a breeder, genetics are an educated guess. Your best bet, wherever you acquire your new best friend, is to assume his temperament genes might need some support and to socialize the heck out of him.

Socialization means giving your puppy lots of positive exposures to lots of widely varied stimuli. "Positive exposures" usually involve feeding some kind of scrumptious treat or otherwise associating the new stimulus with something the pup loves like chasing a ball or playing with a squeaky toy. It also means protecting him from bad experiences – keeping him out of

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situations where someone might treat him roughly or inadvertently scare him. One rule of thumb for socialization that some trainers suggest: 100 new experiences in 100 days. "One hundred!" you gasp? It's not really as hard as it sounds. Here are just a few:

▶ 1-3: Sit on a bench at your neighborhood dog-friendly park,



with your pup on leash. Man in shorts and running shoes jogs by. You feed treats as soon as the man appears and until he is gone from sight. That's three: 1) man; 2) half-naked man; 3) running man.

▶ 4-7: Same park bench, pup on leash. A woman wearing a sun hat walks past with a baby in a stroller and a toddler bouncing by her side. You feed treats when the trio appears, ask the woman to stop and feed a few treats to your pup while he stares at the baby and calm the toddler enough for him to feed the pup a couple of treats, too. That's four: 1) woman with floppy hat; 2) woman pushing stroller; 3) baby in stroller; 4) toddler.

▶ 8-11: Stop at the bank to cash a check on the way home. Forego the luxury of the ATM, and take your pup inside with you. Let him have a potty break first! Stand in line and feed him treats. Ask the person in front of you – young adult male with dreadlocks and several face piercings – and the one behind you – elderly woman with a walker – to feed him treats, also.

That's four more: 1) going in a big, commercial building; 2) man with silver things on his face; 3) man with hairy snakes on his head; and 4) frail woman with walker. You get the idea. That's 11 new experiences in just one day, only 89 more to go.

OK, early socialization is fine and dandy if you have a normal puppy, but what if you find yourself with a shy adult dog or an abnormally fearful pup? Is rehabilitation a lost cause? Not at all. Most dogs can be helped to become more confident and comfortable in the world, although perhaps never as brave as they might have been with better, early handling.

It takes time, a strong commitment and a thorough understanding that you must be

prepared to work at the dog's pace. You can't force him into greetings and confrontations, or you'll reaffirm his conviction that the world is a scary place.

You may want to work with a behavior consultant from the beginning. He or she can help design a program specific to your dog. The consultant may also suggest a complete veterinary exam, including a full thyroid panel, to determine if any physical conditions are contributing to your dog's fearfulness. The two of you may decide at some point in your training program that it's appropriate to consider working with a veterinarian and trying one or more of the several very effective drugs developed to help with canine behavior modification.

Your rehabilitation program will resemble puppy socialization, but rather than exposing your dog to a multitude of stimuli, start with only one or two things. When he's confident with those, you can add to the repertoire.

If your dog is shy even around you, start there. Be constantly aware



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The ideal time for socializing is between 4 weeks and 4 months.

of your body language – avoid direct eye contact and full, frontal approaches. Both are intimidating postures in the dog world. Spend a lot of time sitting on the floor with your side or back to him, dropping tiny, tasty tidbits on the floor around you. Standing or bending over him makes you very threatening from his perspective, even if you don't intend to be.

When he does creep up to nibble your offerings, avoid the temptation to reach out and touch him. Instead, when he's comfortable eating treats off the floor, offer a few in your open palm. Move slowly, and speak softly in a calm, low tone of voice.

Braver About Touch

When he'll eat from your hand with some confidence, move both hands toward him together, and while he's eating treats from one palm, gently touch him under the chin with your other hand. As he gets braver about your touch, you can scratch softly, gradually moving up his cheek until you can scratch behind his ear. If he'll let you grasp his collar without panicking, do that, and release him immediately so he doesn't feel trapped.

Repeat this procedure as many times as necessary until your dog will approach you easily as long as you're being non-threatening. He may even start following you around. Major breakthrough: He wants to be with you!

It's extremely important to avoid traumatizing your dog by chasing or grabbing him. He should be in the house, so his escape options are limited, and when you go out for bathroom breaks with him, he should be on a leash. You may want to attach a house line to his collar – a light nylon line, about five feet long, which he drags



behind him in the house. This enables you to get control of him when necessary, without having to grab for his collar. You'll need to remove the house line when you're not home, so he doesn't get it caught on something without you there to rescue him.

Some dogs warm up rapidly to their new person in the peaceful calm of their own home. Others will take a considerable amount of time to reach this level of trust. Either way, lots of shy dogs never get any farther than this. Let a visitor come to the house, and they're hiding under the bed - or worse - barking ferociously at the intruder in fear-induced aggression. Taking them out in public is even more disastrous, as they're necessarily leashed, and so trapped, even more likely to react with defensive aggression.

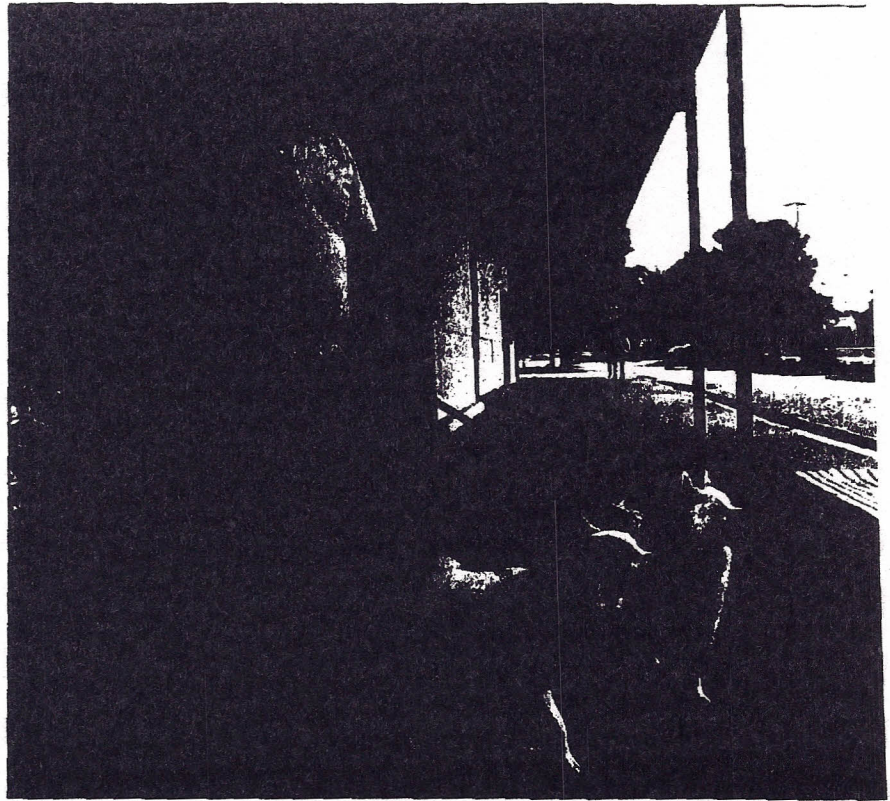
If you choose to go no further with your shy dog, then it's best to crate-train him, and stash him in his safe den behind a closed bedroom door when company comes. If you want to help him be more comfortable in the real world, your work is just beginning.

If you'd like your dog to be

Be constantly aware of your body language - avoid direct eye contact and full, frontal approaches.

more relaxed about visitors, set up practice sessions with friends. Program them to ignore your dog when they come to visit. Start with one person. Have her come to the house and wait for you to let her in without knocking or ringing the doorbell. When she enters, both of you speak calmly and move slowly.

Your dog should be allowed to move around at will - unless you think he'll bite - in which case you're dealing with a behavior



Accompanying an owner on errands introduces dogs to the larger world.

challenge larger than simple shyness. Engage the services of a good, positive behavior consultant.

Sit down and give your friend a dish of tasty treats - chicken is good - and keep a dish for yourself. Sit in the den on opposite sides of the

room and chat, paying no attention to the dog. Both of you can drop chicken tidbits on the floor around your feet, but caution your friend not to talk to or try to reach for your dog if he decides to eat the treats. Spend an hour or so chatting without any attempt to pet the dog. If he seems to be warming up to your friend, have her try to hand-feed - but again without making any attempt to touch your dog.

If he clings to you for reassurance,

talk to him calmly but avoid coddling or sympathizing. Any "Oh, poor baby" or other hysterical utterances will serve only to convince him he's right to worry.

Schedule many of these sessions with various friends over an extended period of time. When you see your dog more relaxed and accepting of your friends individually, invite them in pairs, then trios until he's comfortable with a group. Also, as he becomes more comfortable, you can begin to allow your friends to have more actual contact, but always take your cue from your dog. If he doesn't want to be touched, don't force him to accept attention.

In between your friends' visits, work with your dog outside the home. The concept is similar. Armed with tasty treats, you're going to convince your dog the world is a good place by setting him up in a



safe location and associating scary stimuli with yummy treats. Your hope is that, once he realizes those scary things make yummy stuff happen, he'll decide they're not so scary. This is called counter conditioning – changing his association with a stimulus from negative to positive.

Start in your own front yard. Set up a lawn chair, take a couple of magazines and a tall drink and sit there with him on leash on his favorite rug at your feet. Anytime something comes by that he might be afraid of – pedestrian, jogger, skateboarder, motorcycle, truck – start dropping treats. When the scary thing is gone, stop dropping. Do this as frequently as you can, for as long as you can.

When he's doing well with this exercise in your front yard, it's time to take it on the road. Take him to a moderately used park. Take your lawn chair, magazines, drink, your dog's rug and treats and several orange traffic cones you've taped signs stating, in large letters, "Dog training in progress. Please do not approach." You'll still need to watch for small children who may want to run up.

Comfort Zone

Set your chair up in the grass well off the beaten path, and put your cones at a distance to keep people outside your dog's comfort zone. Now continue your counter conditioning routine, feeding treats anytime anything even remotely scary appears.

As you see the program taking effect, gradually move the cones closer, and ultimately engage the help of other park users, if and when you feel your dog is ready for closer interaction with them. Always remember to let him call the shots. Don't ever try to force

him into an interaction.

You may never get your shy dog to be as bold as he might have been with braver genes or a better start in life. But there's a good chance you can help him to be more confident than he was when you started.

Fortunately for Dunkin, he was still within the very important 4-week to 4-month socialization framework, although barely. Also fortunately for him, his genetic heritage was of a breed that trends to be outgoing and resilient.

Shelter Stress

Unfortunately for him, a shelter is rarely the best place to improve a dog's general outlook on life. The longer he stayed, the less likely it was he'd ever learn to be brave in the real world.

For the next two days I visited Dunkin in his kennel whenever I had the chance. In a short time, rather than shrinking to the back of his run when I approached, he greeted me happily at the gate. We did his behavior assessment on Day 3 and determined, while still somewhat timid, he was doing better.

We put him up for adoption, and that very afternoon his new owner – an experienced, capable dog owner who understood she would need to work with his shyness – fell in love with him. I watched Dunkin happily walk out the front door and returned to the kennels to find another dog to help.

Pat Miller, past president of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers, is a dog behavior consultant and trainer who uses positive training methods at her Peaceable Paws training center in Hagerstown, Md. She's the author of the best-selling "The Power of Positive Dog Training" and recently released "Positive Perspectives: Love Your Dog, Train Your Dog" (DogWise Publishing).



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