

Adopting a Fearful Dog

The SPCA of Texas receives many dogs who are fearful. Some dogs are naturally timid or shy, just like some people, while others may not have had a chance to learn to trust people while they were young. If you adopt one of these dogs, the work to build a relationship of trust could be a long and hard one but the experience can be one of the most rewarding of dog ownership.

Dogs who are afraid might look away, put their heads down, hide, cower, or tremble. Some dogs might even growl or bark. If something that they are scared of gets too close they might snap or nip. By following the guidelines provided you can teach your dog to trust you and keep your dog and others safe.

Tips for Reducing Fear

Take things slowly at first. Be patient. They can get overwhelmed easily.

Some fearful dogs do best when there is at least one happy, confident dog already living in the house. We encourage you to bring your dog to the shelter for an introduction to see if they might get along.

We do not know how they will behave with children or pets. We encourage you to bring family members and pets to the shelter for a Meet & Greet before adopting.

Dog parks are discouraged. This dog is likely to be difficult to catch and we do not know how he will respond if another dog is inappropriate with him. There is also the chance that he will be inappropriate with other dogs in that setting.

We don't know if they are house trained. Do not allow your dog to have access to areas of the home that you cannot see them in case they try to relieve themselves when you aren't looking. Use baby gates and exercise pens to block off areas of the home that you do not want your dog to go into and where you can't keep the door closed.

A regular routine will help build confidence. Dogs learn best when there is a set schedule of predictable events including when and where they eat, when and where they go outside to potty, who is in the house and how they will interact with them.

Petting, hugs and up-close attention can be overwhelming. Hugging dogs can make them feel trapped which can make them feel the need to fight or flee. Give them a chance to get to know you and trust you by giving them the chance to initiate contact with you. If they get too scared they may bite. Be sure not to give them more attention than they can handle.

They may not walk well on leash. Some dogs were never on a leash until they came to the shelter. We work with them bit-by-bit, but they still have a ways to go. DO NOT use a retractable leash. We discourage their use with all dogs for safety reasons, but with fearful dogs they can create significant problems.

Too much freedom too soon is too scary. Keep them in a small area and offer treats and food there. Gradually allow them to explore a larger area. If they want to go back, let them. It will take time.

Don't push your dog to experience too many new things too fast. Don't take your dog to places where you cannot control their experiences including parties, parades, ballgames, etc. Even walking outside in your neighborhood can be terrifying at first.

They may slip out of their collar or harness and run away so keep them on leash AND in securely fenced areas. Nylon harnesses are typically safer than collars, but if they are scared enough they may break free. If they escape they will be difficult to catch. They do not know that they can turn to you for safety yet. Having you chase them will be scary. Use a long leash (15-25 feet, found in pet stores) so that if they won't return to you, you can use the leash to bring them inside.

In the meantime, give high-value treats (meat, cheese, special treats, etc.) every time they approach you so that they learn that coming to you is a good thing. Avoid doing anything unpleasant when they come to you.

Punishment and corrections will significantly slow down the time it takes for them to bond with your family. They don't know they can trust you and corrections will be too scary. Instead reward what you want them to do and manage them carefully so that they can't get into trouble.

They need down time. Let them be alone for frequent breaks when you first adopt them.

Be generous with tiny bits of treats. This helps them learn that you are the bringer of good things in life.