

Under-Socialized Dogs

What is an under-socialized dog?

An under-socialized dog often comes from a situation where the human caretaker, if there is one, pays no attention to the dog's health or social and mental well-being during the first critical 4-12 weeks of life. Sometimes this deficiency has existed for years. As a result, the dog/puppy is not well adjusted and has poor coping skills. He may be fearful of people, other dogs or anything new in the immediate environment.

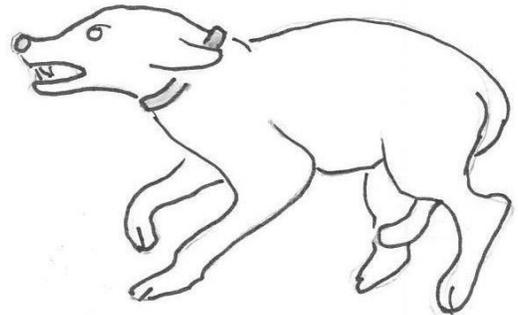
How does a dog become under-socialized?

In recent years, various and new sources of under-socialized, fearful dogs have come to light through the efforts of various rescue organizations.

Puppy Mill Dogs:

A puppy mill dog is a common and classic example of an under-socialized dog. It is a puppy who is raised on a farm solely for profit rather than out of love and respect for the breed. Most puppies from farms are small, purebred dogs or designer dogs, but some larger breed dogs are also raised on "farms". Puppy mill breeders sell their puppies to brokers, pet stores or on the internet. Their goal is to move the puppies out so the mother can carry and nurse another litter as soon as possible. Puppy mills masquerade on the internet under different names such as "professional breeding kennels", "high volume breeders", and "large scale breeders". Responsible breeders will never sell their puppies on the Internet. (Please review our ***Choosing a Dog*** or ***Choosing a Puppy*** handout.)

Under-socialized puppy mill dogs are often afraid of anything new because his life experience consists of how to survive in a cage surrounded by many other caged dogs. A human has fed him and his companions and sometimes used a hose to wash down the cages, but he received little other care. He only knows how to eliminate right where he is. He knows nothing about a friendly human touch, walking on a leash or the world outside his cage.



Street Dogs:

A street dog doesn't belong to anyone. He lives and roams the city streets feeding out of garbage piles or handouts. He may have to fight other street dogs for food or a female in heat. He is not as afraid of his environment as the puppy mill dog. He views humans as a source of food, but is very fearful and will run away if anyone gets too close.

Meat Dogs:

Another group of under-socialized dogs are the so called "meat dogs", often from other countries. A meat dog is raised on a farm to be sold eventually as a meat source. Conditions are similar to the puppy mills except several dogs are kept together in one cage. Because they are a food source, meat dogs are better fed and somewhat healthier, but still highly under-socialized and fearful.

Hoarding Situations:

Dogs and puppies rescued from hoarding situations can be very fearful, under-socialized, malnourished and unhealthy. An animal hoarder will “collect” dogs (also cats, reptiles or other animals) with the intent to rescue the animals. Hoarders will often pose as an animal rescue organization, complete with charitable designations. However, once a dog is under a hoarder’s care, he will likely be neglected and spend the rest of his life (unless truly rescued) in a cage or house in unhealthy and filthy conditions. Hoarding is a mental illness and a hoarder doesn’t have the time, money or ability to care for all the animals she takes in. A dog rescued from a hoarder may be traumatized very fearful, depending on how long he has been in the situation.

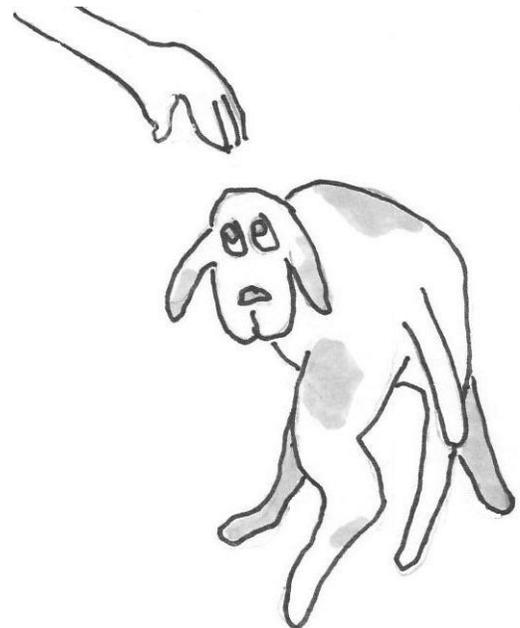
What are the common issues of under-socialized dogs?

Health Problems: If you decide to adopt an under-socialized dog you should make sure you have a good relationship with your vet, because these dogs can have a wide variety of health and medical issues.

- ***Hereditary conditions:*** Puppy mill breeders do not consider the genetic quality of the match that produces puppies. The result is a generation of dogs with serious hereditary conditions. Some of these are epilepsy, heart disease, hip or elbow dysplasia, anemia, deafness, cataracts and respiratory illness.
- ***General Growth, Physical, and Health Issues:*** Pet store puppies, puppy mill dogs, street dogs and hoarding dogs often have conditions such as parasites, heartworm disease, giardia, distemper, parvovirus, etc. A street dog is more likely to engage in dog fights over food or mating rights, and as a result he may have more medical issues such as bite infections and/or bone or muscle injuries.

Behavior/Training Problems: Most under-socialized dogs have not lived with people in a companionable way. These dogs may view people as a food provider, which is a positive situation as far as behavior modification is concerned, but there is still a long way to go on the rehabilitation front.

- ***Environmental change (coping skills):*** These dogs are likely to be afraid of any new environmental stimuli they encounter. They have not learned how to process and assimilate novel events. Street dogs are less afraid of novel events, but more wary of specific events, like hands reaching for them, due to bad experiences.
- ***Flight distance:*** Either due to lack of experience or negative experiences, these dogs tend to maintain a “safety zone” of distance away from people. Coupled with their lack of coping skills, they tend to startle easily, have a tendency to bolt and don’t associate feeling safe with people.
- ***Handling:*** They may have never worn a collar or harness and the only time a leash was attached was with a slip lead so they could be dragged somewhere. As a result of indifferent or inhumane handling, they don’t want to be touched or restrained and can bite defensively if they feel trapped.



- **Fear biting:** Veterinary care and routine grooming and maintenance can provoke significant defensive reactions, including fear biting.
- **Housetraining:** Because these dogs never lived in a house with people, they are not housetrained. Street dogs had the freedom to eliminate wherever they want, whenever they want. They have no concept of “holding it” until they can go outside. Puppy mill dogs and meat dogs had no choice and eliminated in the cage where they slept. Housetraining these dogs can be very challenging.
- **Canine Social Skills:** If these dogs have lived in a communal situation, they are often more comfortable with other dogs than people. However, some can be fearful and aggressive with dogs.

How do you modify the behavior?

With patience, good technique and a long-term time commitment, significant improvements may be made. However, it is likely that life-long environmental management will be necessary.

Management: In order to safely work with an under-socialized dog, you need to know what actions will trigger high levels of fear. You want to avoid stressing the dog and you don’t want to provoke a fear bite.

Getting dressed: The dog needs to accept a collar or harness and a leash to begin rehabilitation and training. However, if “getting dressed” creates stress, you may want to avoid this process.

- If handling around his head and neck is an issue, make a short (2 – 2 ½ ft.) cable lead that you leave affixed to his collar at all times. One end is snapped to his collar and the other end has a loop where you can attach a regular leash. This enables the handler to allow the fearful dog his “flight distance,” but still utilize a leash.
- If neck pressure due to being dragged with a leash is a trigger, oftentimes using a harness is acceptable to the dog. Soak the harness with a taste deterrent product like Bitter Apple (so he doesn’t chew the harness off) and put it on the dog. You then attach a cable lead (discussed above) to the chest harness clip. This apparatus remains on the dog continuously until you have established a stress free touching relationship.
- Note: if you use the harness, you will still fit the dog with a collar. If he is a flight risk, we recommend that you use a martingale collar, attaching both the martingale loop and the harness chest loop to the cable lead. Adjust the martingale so there isn’t pressure on the dog’s neck, rather the harness takes all of the leash pressure while the martingale is a safety back up system if the dog manages to back out of his harness. If you only need a harness, fit the dog with a regular collar so that he can become habituated to it. In this case, you aren’t using the collar, merely allowing him to become comfortable wearing one.
- If you cannot safely or without undue struggle fit the initial collar and/or harness apparatus to the dog, you may need to use a muzzle. The muzzle can eliminate conflict in this situation as it reduces the dog’s choices. Once the initial fitting is complete, you would only get as close to the dog as the cable lead, attaching the cable lead to your leash or long line.

Home safe home: Prepare your home by creating a safe space.

- The safe space should include a sleeping spot, food and water bowls in an area where you can put down pee pads to aid in housetraining (if necessary). The dog should be able to easily move around in the area and still be able to interact with you. Do not shut a door to block access. Instead, use a baby gate or x-pen to keep him confined.

- A dog from a puppy mill, meat dog or street dog background may not accept a crate as a safe place. Do not force a dog into a crate! Introduce a door-less crate in your house or in his “safe space” and feed meals inside the crate to develop a comfort level with crates. (Please review our **Crate Training** handout.)
- Your dog doesn’t always have to stay in the safe space. When you are home you can let him explore while wearing a dragging leash. If he initiates contact, slip him a treat without undue fanfare, rewarding him for showing interest in you without overwhelming him with contact.
- Place your dog in his “safe space” whenever you have to leave the house. Make sure it is secure and that he can’t escape.

Relationship:

Communicating with a fearful dog: Fear of human interaction is a primary underlying issue. Direct eye contact, the sound of your voice, a person facing him or standing in front of him, or movement towards him can be frightening from the dog’s perspective.

- When communicating with your dog, use the language a fearful dog understands:
 - Speak softly, or not at all.
 - Avoid eye contact and sit on the floor rather than standing.
 - Give the dog opportunities to approach you rather than approaching him.
 - Turn and move away to elicit a following behavior.
 - Use a very long leash (if possible) to allow the dog to choose to follow you rather than creating a trapped feeling on leash.
- It is the handler’s responsibility to carefully observe and learn what the dog finds rewarding and what he finds punitive. Eliminate or minimize any scary actions and reward with items he truly enjoys. Again, this is from HIS perspective.
- You can implement a counter conditioning program. He needs to learn that human interaction is not bad and can bring good things. (Please review our **Counter Conditioning** handout for more detailed instructions.)

Creating a bond: In order to overcome his fears, your dog has to bond with you, his new pack leader. How quickly this happens depends on the age and temperament of the dog. Puppies will likely bond faster than an older dog.

- **Let him just “be” with you:** While you are reading, doing bookwork or using the computer are good times to try bonding. Block access to the space so the dog has to be there, but **do not interact with him**. Eventually, curiosity will get the better of him and he will come over to check you out. Either continue to ignore him or reward his visit with a small treat or edible chew toy given without eye contact.
- **Under-socialized dogs often prefer other dogs to people:** The presence of another social dog during the initial stages of rehabilitation can assist an under-socialized dog overcoming his fears. This dog’s presence can be particularly useful in teaching the fearful dog to accept a leash or to follow you out to the yard for bathroom breaks. Note: It will be important to remove the other social dog from the scenario as soon as feasible to ensure that your under-socialized student learns to bond with a person.

- **Provide rewarding experiences:** Quite a few “fun things” have been lacking in his life. Safely and slowly provide these fun things for him. Examples may include:
 - **Play and toy:** Object oriented play provides a buffer between an under-socialized dog and too much human focus. If he is too wary of people to play with you, try to join a play session between the social dog and the fearful dog to establish a play relationship. (Please review our **Play: Tug & Retrieving Games** handout.)
 - **Chew time:** Provide tasty new objects to chew and foods to try. Use his nose and taste to unlock a new world for him.
 - **The Great Outdoors:** Grass, freedom to run (use a long line in a fenced area) and interesting things to watch at a safe distance are other examples of potentially rewarding experiences that you may be able to bestow on your new learner.

Training:

Housetraining: Housetraining is a very high priority and enormously challenging, especially if your dog is difficult to handle (you can’t just carry him outside) or won’t follow you. He has never learned how to “hold it” and wait to be let outside. Younger dogs (less than six months) can probably learn when and where to eliminate. Older, smaller breed dogs have the most difficult time.

- The premise of housetraining is that a dog doesn’t want to soil his sleeping/feeding area. The first necessary step is to have your confined “safe space” prepared as noted above. For the purposes of housetraining, the dog should stay in this area unless he can be closely supervised.
- Take the dog out hourly, if possible. Stay with him when outside and if he goes, give praise and encouragement IF that is rewarding to him. If he doesn’t eliminate, return him to his “safe space” and try again in 15 minutes. Do NOT punish for accidents, just give him an opportunity to do his thing in the right place. (Please review our **Housetraining: Young & Old** handout.)

Other Training: Training isn’t as high a priority, or even possible sometimes, during the first few months of working with under-socialized dogs. Most of your time is going to be spent creating a management system that works, developing a relationship and housetraining. Once you have accomplished those objectives, then training becomes of paramount importance as it provides structure for dogs lacking coping skills or a normal frame of reference.

- **“Find It” Games** are fun and easy to teach. Basically, you toss a treat and give the “Find It” cue. The dog should chase after the treat, gobble it up and look to you for another. Repeat the exercise in the opposite direction encouraging the dog to come towards you as he chases the next treat. (Please review our **Find It** handout for additional information.)

Training Resources:

We also provide **Dog Training Instructors** and **Consultants** available for private training or consultations (on-site or in-home) at 415.506.6280 or OhBeHAVE@MarinHumane.org.

Remember to license your dog (It’s the LAW)! If your dog gets lost, a license tag on your dog’s collar is the fastest way to reunite you and your dog. Even if your dog is microchipped, a license tag is immediately visible and doesn’t require a scanning device to read. For more information about licensing, microchipping, and other services provided by **Marin Humane**, visit us at MarinHumane.org or stop by at 171 Bel Marin Keys Blvd, Novato, CA.