



Rovers Return Dog Rescue

Feed Fix Network

Helping a Shy or Skittish Dog

Bonding with a dog can be difficult when you have just rescued them and all you want to do is love and care for them. Dogs with a rough past may be reluctant to trust or return attention at first.

KEY ACTIONS

- Do not rush.
- Let the dog move away if they growl or need space.
- Use high-value treats and calm body language.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

You may not know what the dog has been through, so treat every situation with caution.

They may want affection but may not know how to trust yet.

High-quality treats are a good start.

Crate training is recommended. Feed in the crate, give treats in the crate, and leave the door open so it becomes a safe place.

If you have concerns about escape, GPS collars can help you feel more confident finding your dog if they get out.

GET TO KNOW THE DOG ON THEIR TIME

Pay attention to signs that your dog needs space, including lip licking, yawning, panting, tail tucking, and avoiding eye contact. If these appear while you approach, respect their space and try again later.

Avoid big gestures and keep your voice low and calm. Sit on the ground and let your dog come to you. Hovering or towering over your dog can make them feel trapped.

When petting, avoid sensitive areas such as the head, ears, tail, and paws. Focus on safer areas such as the back. Do not let unfamiliar people touch your dog unless your dog is interested.

CLASSICAL CONDITIONING

If your dog is skittish when you approach, carry high-value food such as cheese or chicken. Walk slowly toward your dog, drop the treat nearby, and keep walking while speaking in a soothing tone.

Repeat daily or multiple times a day until your dog perks up when they see you approaching. Once they respond positively, drop the treat and stay nearby without interfering with the food.

Taking food away from a fearful dog reinforces their reasons not to trust you.

CREATE A COMFORTABLE SPACE

Place your dog in a room that is not too big or too small, where they can feel safe. Provide a bed and a place to hide if needed. Their own space and time help them open up gradually.

FIRST DAYS HOME

For the first few days, always accompany the dog outside. One of the first things they may do is look for a way out. They need to learn this is home.

A Martingale collar is strongly recommended because it is difficult to slip. Do not use a harness at this point for a skittish dog.

Try putting the leash on before giving a treat or sitting calmly together. Let the dog wear the leash around the house for a few days, then occasionally pick it up for a short time and put it down again.

WALKS AND SOCIALIZING

After at least a week, and only if you are confident, you may take the dog outside. Avoid noisy or scary places. Start in residential neighborhoods and gradually move to busier locations.

Bring treats for loud or unexpected moments. You want the dog to experience outside life positively. When the dog is scared, do not pet or treat in a way that rewards fearful behavior.

Many fearful dogs are more comfortable around other dogs. Avoid closed dog parks because they can be noisy and chaotic. Choose one calm, human-trusting dog at a time as a role model.

REWARD THEIR EFFORT

No matter how illogical behavior may seem, your dog is handling the situation the only way they know how. Keep your voice calm, low, and soothing.

Keep favorite treats nearby to reward good behavior and remind them that you are someone to trust. Be patient, kind, and loving. Slowly, your dog can overcome shyness and learn to trust you.

