



# Greater Androscoggin Humane Society

[www.SavingPetsinMaine.org](http://www.SavingPetsinMaine.org)

## Common misconceptions of humans towards shy dogs:

- Dog was abused/neglected.
- Usually more fearful of men so it must have been a male abuser.
- Babying, baby talk, coddling, allowing the behavior will help the dog “trust” and build confidence.
- The dog just needs petting and love and will come around in time.
- The best approach is to allow dog to stay in his kennel, under the bed, etc. and someday the dog will gain more confidence.
- Shy/fearful dogs may turn aggressive and are unsafe because they aren't friendly and may show their teeth or what seems like aggression.

## Understanding your shy dog:

Normally a shy/fearful dog, depending on past history, has had limited socialization with humans. This is especially true if there is a lack of aggression/reactivity and only fear is present. They often do not understand the VALUE of humans. These dogs come from a wide variety of past experiences - some from southern states where they free-roamed, some from severe hoarding situations, and others from breeding facilities; they may even come from a home where dog was left unattended most of his/her life in-home.

Most of the time, a shy/fearful dog who has had limited human contact and who has never learned the value in humans has no confidence in his surroundings, in humans, and in himself because many times the life that they've known has been completely uprooted. Free-roaming dogs, where scavenging for food etc. was essential, in hoarding/overcrowding situations (where due to the amount of animals food was many times just tossed out) neglect situations, or in breeding situations with limited handling and interaction, one thing is always a common denominator. The animal is not used to direct human contact or handling. These dogs are special. They are considered “clean slates” and it is key that from the moment they step foot in a home they are able to build confidence.

When a dog does not understand the value in a human, immediate handling (hugging, petting, etc.) takes away the animal's rights and freedom to feel comfortable in his surroundings. Shy dogs will adjust but need patience, time, and to be conditioned properly to build confidence and learn the value of humans. Exercises, such as those listed below, will assist in proper conditioning to their new environment and to people.

Studies show that many dogs are more fearful of men due to their size, upright/tighter posture, abrupt approach, and deeper/louder voices.

Many times people have a tendency to feel “sorry” for their shy/fearful dog which is by far the worst thing you can do. Babying, baby talk, coddling, picking the dog up, and allowing the behavior will reinforce behavior, promote continuance and will not build confidence in the animal at all. When humans act differently than they normally do in the presence of fear, elevating voice, picking the animal up, allowing animal to hide behind human, etc. all send a message to the dog that there is truly something wrong because their human is not acting as they usually do.



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Often, people who adopt/rescue these dogs will allow the dog to adjust by allowing them to either sit in their kennel, under a bed, a table, etc. for more decompression time than normal assuming that the dog will just warm up and adjust. Depending on the history of the animal that may not be the case. The dog must learn value in humans/human interaction and initially, they must build confidence in their environment that now has humans in it, whereas prior their life did not. To allow a dog to stay in his “safe zone” and feeding/watering there, sleeping (ultimately hiding) alone with limited human traffic/movement must be monitored to ensure that the scale is not tipped where the dog is continuing to have limited human contact. Like humans, a dog will also continue behavior if allowed, so it is key that the dog not be allowed to spend more time alone/without contact than with.

Many times, shy dogs will low-growl, bare teeth, and skirt away from humans. That is a natural reaction if we are not respecting the initial body language signals they are sending out asking for space. Most times, since they have had no prior interaction with us, they haven’t learned any value in aggression towards humans. They are talking to us, asking for distance, and what we do with that will set the stage for their views towards humans for the rest of their lives. If those signals are ignored, it is from us not respecting their communication, and that will leave the animal no choice but to react at a different level. So, to say that they are showing aggression is a gray area as they are not showing true aggression because they do not know “what we are” or have not made an association with us either positive or negative.

One thing is clear. Shy dogs do not need us to feel sorry for them, to baby them, but they also don’t benefit from isolation or the continuance of learned behaviors. They need confident leaders who will help them to make a positive association with humans and to learn the value that we have in their lives.

## How can you help your shy dog?

Initially, until they gain confidence within our household/with us, management is key.

In order to build confidence in you and in his/her surroundings:

- Avoid crowded areas where your dog may be overwhelmed by strangers or if your dog is fearful with other dogs, including dog parks that are overly crowded.
- Use a leash, crate, or baby gate to prevent your dog from interacting with strangers in your home until you have started a proper behavioral plan and his/her confidence is built up in your/his environment.
- Inform people who start to approach your dog that your dog is nervous/shy and that you are building confidence and ask that they do not address/pet your dog.
  - It is up to us to help our dog build confidence and that is the first step in positive leadership with your dog. We do not want our dogs to make the decision to react so try your best to put yourself between the approaching person and your dog to avoid interaction.
- Try your best to create distance between scary objects, people, etc. by crossing the street and/ or going in a different direction.



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## Tips for setting up success in-home:

- Allow dog to have a “safe zone” or an area to rest in, but all food, water, high-value treats should be given in the presence of humans.
- Dog should be hand-fed by all members of the family once or twice a day.
  - If dog is less inclined to eat, may add bits of meat, shredded cheese, etc. to up the value of the food for the dog. If the dog will not accept food from hand, tossing onto the ground at your feet and ignoring dog may suffice initially until he is confidently approaching.
  - Please note that dogs, like all living beings, are driven by self-preservation and the dog may not seem to eat as much at first, but utilizing that drive for self-preservation will help the dog overcome his fear and will also help him understand that all good things CAN involve a human.
- All toys/interactive play should involve a human.
  - If the dog takes a toy and walks away, always have a secondary and make a great excited deal about playing with the toy. Most of the time the dog will show interest and return but make it a point to ignore the dog (do not call his name, etc.) until he chooses to engage in play or shows interest in the toy.
  - Some dogs value toys more than food and also enabling their “predatory chase drive” by using a rope with a toy tied to the end etc. will help them engage faster.
- Slowly increase the time a dog is in a room with a family member (NOT a stranger).
  - If the dog seems to prefer being away from your family, close the doors/gate the other rooms off, and everyone must ignore the dog so that the dog can become comfortable being in your presence without interference.
  - A great time to do so is in the evening when watching tv, children doing homework, even eating dinner as there are more distractions for the humans and it makes it easier to ignore the dog.
  - When the dog walks by, goes to sniff someone or something, toss a treat or bit of food but continue to ignore the dog.
- If a shy dog is not confident in you/himself/the environment, then walks would not be recommended at this point. Most of the time walking a dog that is not confident in the above can cause pulling at the leash, hyper-vigilance, (constantly scanning the area,) and is a highly stressful time for your dog as well as for you.
  - Dogs do not know how to de-stress like humans do and when their stress “bucket” is full, can react to stimuli more easily/aggressively because of all of those combined triggers.



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- Getting him/her used to his/her own yard, his owners, etc. first is key and walking him around your yard is usually best until confidence is built. The same can be said for visiting strangers/new places depending on what your dog's "triggers" are.

Once your dog has gained more confidence in you/himself and his surroundings, the next steps are:

- It is time to add in strangers if your dog is actively seeking you/your family members out and he seems calmer in-home and outside in your yard.
  - He/she will start to stop and start to smell the flowers, engage more in the activities in your home, and see a lot more relaxed in every day life.
  - The first step is to figure out what distance your dog is still comfortable around strangers. It is called his "threshold" and some dogs have issues with a person right in front of them, others, it could be 20 feet away.
    - Watch your dog's behavior when a person comes into view to find what his threshold may be. When working with him, he should be just under or at his threshold, and that can be gauged by how he focuses on you, if he is still accepting those high value treats (like meat, cheese, etc.) or willing to engage in play. When your dog goes over his threshold it can set his confidence level back in himself, his environment, and in you if it happens too frequently. Please see attached handout for more information on threshold.
- Repeat these sessions keeping them positive several times a week and in different situations.
  - If there is a bump in the road, reset your dog and try again but taking note of his stress level. Is his body tense, is his tail tucked, is he making himself small and/or lowering himself to the ground, or is he making himself "taller" and seem to be pulling on the leash. Is he panting, drooling, are the whites of his eyes showing, is he shaking off? All of those are key indicators on his stress level.
  - The rule of thumb is that a dog's body should be loose and wiggly, the stiffer the body more stress is present. For all purposes of this presentation I will leave out tail wagging as dogs may wag their tails when they are overstimulated and/or stressed out so reading your dog's body language as a whole is key.

*Please note: This information is provided as a basic tip sheet on working with your shy dog. If your dog does show aggression and you have concerns for your safety, the safety of others or have other concerns, please contact a behavioral specialist.*