

Socializing the Rescue Dog

By Anne Copeland

When a dog arrives in a rescue organization, most often it is coming from conditions of neglect and often abuse. Occasionally dogs are owner turn-ins and sometimes street strays, but usually the dogs coming in are from puppy mills and back-yard breeders. These dogs have not had the ordinary exposure and socializing that pets get. They are not used to household noises, different ages and sizes of people, various surfaces on which to walk, and most human contact has at best been brief and at worst, abusive.



These dogs must learn that humans can be kind and are the source of all good things in life: food, water, housing, play and love. Remember, these animals did not become fearful or shy in just a couple of weeks and they won't become social beings in just a couple of weeks either. Depending on their earlier experiences, as well as the individual's genetic make-up, some will be forgiving and loving within a few months and others will still be uneasy and skittish two or three years after adoption.

First thing to remember when working with a shy or fearful dog is to give them as much "personal space" as possible. When you can, allow them to approach you and when they do, praise and reward them for it. If you have other pets in the home, the new animal often will follow the established one(s) in approaching people. Try not to make quick moves and keep your voice low, slow, and soothing. Try not to take the newly rescued dog to large, noisy gatherings with lots of new people and dogs. When possible, see if you can arrange home visits with one or two other people and dogs and reward the new rescue when they make any overtures toward the strangers.

If the new rescue seems to be accepting new people and dogs with minimal distress, you might want to consider taking them to a low-key training class. Some groups have puppy socialization classes and Greater Chicago Cavalier Rescue has a list of training locations on file that will allow foster dogs to attend their classes at no charge. Not only does going to a training class help the dog to meet more people in a controlled situation, but it also builds a bond between the handler and the dog and the dog learns to trust that the handler can keep them "safe."

While the GCCR events can be fun for most Cavaliers, for the newly rescued dog, the high level of activity can be overwhelming. Please do not bring a shy or fearful dog to these events and just "dump" them into the fray. While the majority of rescues get along well with other dogs, the number of strange people who probably will be reaching to pet or trying to hold that new rescue can be scary to them and reinforce their fears, setting back your socialization efforts.



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If you take exposure to new people, new places, and new situations slowly, calmly, and with lots of support, most of the rescues will be ready to move on to more activities within a couple of months from the time they began their foster life. However, if the dog you are caring for is still shy, fearful, and reluctant to meet strangers even three, four, or six months into their rehabilitation, don't take it as a personal failure. Not all dogs are party animals; some prefer the quiet home life with minimum change and turmoil. With love and care, almost all of them soon will become loving companions to their new owners as the resilience of the Cavalier spirit is legendary. And lastly, but absolutely not least, the Cavalier has been bred to be a family companion and will suffer greatly if not allowed to be in the home with the family. It is not a breed to be turned out into the yard for hours and hours without human interaction and never, never should be tied outside for hours and hours (nor should any dog.) Some guard dog breeds can fare just fine left to patrol the grounds and watch the flocks; the Cavalier is definitely not one of them.

