

New Beginnings for Dogs

Turn your shy shelter dog into a confident companion.

Pat Miller

When Sue Richmond walked into my training class with Skipper, I knew we had a challenge. She had recently adopted the 3-year-old Shetland Sheepdog from a rescue group. All she knew about him was that he had spent his entire life in a backyard.

His lack of socialization was evident in his tucked tail, flattened ears, and nervous glances around the training yard. Like many adopted dogs, Skipper needed help changing his fear of the world around him into curiosity and confidence.

Sue had already charged the clicker by taking the little plastic box I had given her the prior week and feeding Skipper a treat every time she pushed the metal tongue to make a clicking sound. When I saw Skipper's eyes light up at the sound of the clicker, I knew he was on the road to a better life. He already understood that the sound meant Treat! Now it was a matter of time, and small steps, to help him understand the world was safe.

A dog's personality is a combination of genetics and environment-nature and nurture. A genetically bold puppy will be timid if he doesn't get adequate socialization during the important development period from 4 weeks to 4 months of age. A genetically timid puppy can achieve confidence with lots of socialization.

Open the Lines of Communication

Your shelter or rescue dog will probably come with some baggage in the form of too little socialization, or a negative kind. When you adopt, you commit to help your new dog overcome these types of challenges.

Your first tool in building your adopted dog's confidence is communication. A poorly socialized dog has had little reason or opportunity to communicate with humans. The sooner you begin communicating with the consistent use of terms, a calm and positive tone, and tools like a clicker and treats the sooner the two of you will start forming the all-important bond that will ensure him a lifelong, loving home.

Think of the clicker and treats as an interpreter -- a means to establish a common language. The click says "Yes! You earned a treat for that behavior!" Dogs, like all living things, want to make good things happen.

When your dog discovers he can make you click the clicker (and feed him treats) by offering behaviors, he can start to make sense of his world. When you associate words or hand signals with his behaviors, the two of you begin to communicate -- he's learning your language. As you observe and interpret his behaviors more closely, you're learning his.