

Tips on Fostering Puppy Mill Dogs

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Nose to the Ground to Help Hounds by the author.*

Although this article refers to “fostering” puppy mill dogs, the information is also pertinent to “adopted” puppy mill dogs. For more information about puppy mill dogs, visit www.nowisconsinpupmills.com/mill-survivors.html

I have several favorite sayings about fostering dogs from puppy mills. First, to paraphrase the U.S. Army slogan, I want them to “be all they can be,” meaning that just because they have lived their whole life in cages, we shouldn’t set limits on them. Some can go on to be therapy dogs. Some will be very well-adjusted. Some will always be shy. My job in giving them a foster home is to show them there is more to life and take them as far as they can go.

Another saying is that it’s my job to put as much as I can “on their resume.” For example, one mill dog may always be shy or afraid of men, but if I can work really hard on everything else, then she becomes more adoptable. Therefore, I work hard on manners, crate training, commands, housetraining, and so on. The more this dog has on her “resume,” the more likely an adopter will overlook a little shyness or fear of certain things. I’ll be able to say, “Yes, this dog is shy, but she knows how to sit...is perfect in a crate...rides well in the car...walks great on leash...” You get the idea!

I have fostered quite a few mill dogs over the years. Some have gone on to lead normal, well-adjusted lives just like any other dog. A few have gone to humane education events with me. All have learned to enjoy walks. A few carry a lot of the “wounds” or fears from the mill, but in providing a foster home, you have to give them every opportunity to lead a normal life. Merely feeling sorry for them doesn’t help. This reminds me of another favorite saying: “You can heal the wounds, but the scars often remain forever.” We can’t always fix everything, but at least we can try to fix what we can.

A friend told me another great saying: “Look back, but don’t stare.” This means it’s good to know where these dogs have come from and what they have had to endure, but both they and we have to move on. Sometimes we overanalyze everything they do or question why they do it, but we’ll never understand in their terms exactly what it was like to live as a dog in a mill. Also, any mill dog in our care represents one of the lucky ones that got out. So many never do!

A few things I have learned about mill dogs along the way

Pairs Most puppy mill dogs have been raised in a pack and in fact were never alone, so they enjoy other dogs and find comfort in being with them. Many have difficulty living as an only dog. Even though they need to bond with people and I do separate them from the pack, still they thrive in a pack.

Puppy mentality Since a mill dog has had limited experiences in life, everything outside the mill is a whole new world to him. Adopting an adult mill dog is almost like adopting a puppy. We must introduce changes slowly and positively.

Use a long line For the dog’s safety and your peace of mind, keep her on a long leash at all times (except when she’s unattended in a secure location indoors). A frightened dog often tries to run away, but chasing her only makes her more fearful. Instead, when she bolts, you can easily catch her by stepping on the leash as she goes by. Don’t drag her toward you. Simply use the leash to keep her in place while you approach slowly. Using this technique, you can eventually teach her to wait or freeze when startled.

Fences Check that all fencing is secure. Also, *every* mill dog should initially be on a long line, *even when outdoors*, until the dog can be trusted to wait or freeze. These dogs aren't used to huge open spaces, and once they're outside in a fenced yard, they may panic and run or even climb a fence to get away.

Crate Make sure your puppy mill dog has a crate. So often we hear: "But he spent his whole life in a crate, so I don't want to do that." Yet a crate can provide comfort and security to a mill dog. Also, since he's never experienced a home environment, a crate is essential for his safety. He hasn't learned not to dash out the door. Safety first! The crate also makes it easier to teach him to mind his manners (no rooting through the trash can) as well as to become housetrained, so it helps make adoption easier.

Feeding Feed the dog in her crate. Living in a mill cage makes some dogs aggressive over food, while others were afraid to eat and never got enough. Feeding in a secure place like a crate eliminates any competition at mealtime. This practice also encourages clean crate habits. Many mill dogs are afraid of bowls/food, as mealtime was the only time the "miller" came around.

Safety-proof your house Mill dogs don't know about stairs, so secure the area above each stairway to prevent falls. They don't understand furniture or heights, so don't allow them to jump on and off the furniture and hurt themselves. Secure trashcans and other temptations in the environment, much as you would for the safety of a puppy or toddler. Remember, this is a whole new world.

Beware of going off-leash So often we hear people say: "But I know my dog, and he's fine" – often after just weeks in the foster home. Don't be lulled into a false sense of security because your dog seems to stay nearby or isn't frightened during the first few weeks. Some dogs are almost in "culture shock" with all the new smells, sounds, and sights in their world. As they adjust, it can take months or even a year to see their full temperament and reactions to the environment. Has your dog heard an ambulance go by? The crash of thunder? The tornado warning siren? Your dog hasn't experienced a lot in the first few weeks, so beware of a false sense of security from the initial "shocked" period of no reaction.

Housetraining Most info on mill dogs will tell you how hard they are to housetrain. I disagree. This is not difficult *if* handled correctly and, again, slowly. My experience is that most mill dogs found a place in their teeny pen where they tried to keep clean, and they will carry that over. By using a crate and introducing your mill dog to the rest of the house slowly, room by room, you can teach her to keep her new larger den (your home) clean. Treat your new dog as if she's a puppy, and with reward, praise, patience and consistency, housetraining can be successful. If your dog is very small, you may want to consider indoor training. I suggest picking one or the other (indoor or outdoor) and sticking with it.

Flight risk All puppy mill survivors are high flight risks. Never take your dog outside a securely fenced yard until you are thoroughly bonded. Then, if you take your dog outside the fence, double-check to be sure his harness is secure. I sometimes use a collar and harness, then run the lead from the collar through the harness for extra safety. If a mill dog gets loose outside a secured area, he will likely run until he drops; catching him will be quite a feat. Prevention is by far the best policy.

Doorways Many mill dogs are quite fearful of passing a person while going through an open door. Many will *run* through doors. You must open the door wide and stand behind it so that your dog feels safe. You might even need to stand a distance beyond the open door to get her to follow. Also, when frightened, your dog may unexpectedly dash out the front door; so if your yard isn't fenced, it's a good idea to put up baby gates at all exterior doors that the dog might be able to reach.

Coprophagy Stool-eating is common in puppy mill survivors. While there is much contention as to the cause, most rescuers feel it is a learned behavior. Again, prevention is the best policy. Clean up the yard frequently. Some mill dogs stop this behavior over time.

Heath issues Many mill dogs are prone to dental problems due to poor diet and lack of care when younger. If you have ever had a toothache, you know how painful this can be. As part of your commitment to rescuing a mill dog, make sure he gets the comfort he deserves through proper dental care via your vet. Also, because mill dogs usually live in damp housing, a soft warm place as they age is a must for sore joints. Dietary supplements like MSM and glucosamine can also help ease sore joints as mill dogs age.

Leash training Many mill dogs have lived on chicken wire, so grass and even solid ground are new to them. They have also never pottied while on leash, so learning this can take time. Leash training should be gradual and gentle. Never pull a dog by the leash, as this is reminiscent of being grabbed by the neck – a common puppy mill practice.

Collar/harness Many mill dogs respond more positively to a well-fitted harness. Whether you choose collar or harness, make sure it is secure. When truly frightened, mill dogs can buck out of either – *and if a mill dog gets loose, he may never be caught again!* Collars must be tight. It's recommended that you initially use *both* a collar *and* a harness for safety, so that if the dog slips out of one, the other is still attached. Usually, two leashes or a “coupler” attached to a leash/harness works fine for this double safety technique.

ID Make sure your dog is always wearing an ID tag!

Touching/picking up the dog Try massage/TTouch. Keep it short and positive. Resist the urge to pick up your mill dog, especially at first. Many mill dogs just don't enjoy being picked up, and so I try to separate out handling and picking up; in other words, I teach them first that “hands are good” through gentle petting, massage and TTouch, without picking up the dog. Do not touch or pet around the head or neck initially, as most mill dogs are not comfortable with this type of petting. Most have never been held or were only held and picked up for negative experiences. If you must pick up your dog, make sure he can see you picking him up. It's good to put a word to it prior to picking up the dog, such as saying “up” in a cheerful tone. Hold the dog securely while gently stroking his back. Some dogs never learn to feel safe or enjoy being picked up due to their mill treatment.

Attention The dog's whole life up to this point has been built around survival only. It's your job to keep him safe and secure while he learns about life and love. Yes, there's a lot to make up for, but a little bit of love at a time works best. Dogs live in the moment, so you can't go back and “make up” for what they didn't have. Mill dogs have had nothing, and therefore they may attach to you quickly. If you give them too much too soon, they'll find it difficult to adjust when you have to take it away later. For example, don't take weeks off work and spend every minute with the dog. You are only setting her up for disaster when you later return to normal routine. Get her used to what her new world will be like. She still needs to spend time alone in a crate. She must learn to deal with life beyond you, so introduce love, attention and her new world slowly.

Confidence Dogs that learn new things become more confident. A puppy mill dog will have more confidence if you can teach commands like “wait” and “touch” – my two favorites for mill dogs.

Fitted clothing to reduce stress A close-fitting t-shirt purchased at a pet store or made from a toddler's t-shirt or tank can help reduce the dog's anxiety. You can also purchase an anxiety wrap, which uses a technique called maintained pressure to calm your animal by soothing the sensory receptors. It is similar to swaddling a baby or using a “hug box” to calm autistic children. Though it sounds a little “out there,” the connection between sensory stimuli and behavioral patterns has long been a staple of such touch therapies as Tellington TTouch. For more information, see www.anxietywrap.com.

Routine All dogs prefer routine, but puppy mill dogs thrive on routine. They like to know what's coming next. Don't change too many things in a dog's world at once. A predictable routine will help him adjust to living outside the four walls of the mill.

Journaling It can be helpful to keep a journal on the progress of your puppy mill dog, even if you only write entries once a week. Rehabbing the puppy mill dog can be frustrating at times. Often, progress occurs in baby steps. A journal will help you look back and chart how far your dog has come. Sometimes we forget what wonderful strides we have made on the journey if we don't look back to where we started.

I believe that once our lives have been changed by a mill dog, we're responsible to those left behind. We must use our knowledge to educate others and speak for those who have no voice. Only through education can we change the lives of our furry friends imprisoned in the mills.

Someone with a three-legged mill dog once told me they were unsure how to answer questions and were a little embarrassed to discuss their dog's previous life. I believe that anyone who has helped save one of these precious creatures should be proud. That person is a hero and shouldn't be afraid to share the stories!

A great website at which you can educate yourself about how the pet stores, brokers and millers operate is www.igsafehouse.org. Go to "Livestock Reports" to understand how this despicable business works. To find out more about what happens right here in our own state, where puppy mills have increased more than 300 percent in the last few years, visit www.NoWisconsinPupymills.com. It is imperative for us to speak for those who can't speak for themselves. We must educate people and change the laws for those dogs that are left behind.

Puppy mill dogs are innocent victims in a world run by greed! Adopting and rehabilitating them takes time, love and patience, but the rewards are tenfold. These dogs can blossom into wonderful companions that will be grateful for a chance to experience life outside the mill.

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