

FAQ's on the rehabilitation of a puppy mill dog

Every mill survivor is different. What works on one will completely fail on another. The only thing that is consistent is that these dogs will need lots of patience, understanding and love. And probably most importantly, acceptance: unconditional acceptance of what they are capable of giving and receiving.

We would love to say that every puppy mill survivor only needs love to become a wonderful family pet, but that wouldn't be true. Love is definitely needed in large quantities, but so is patience. The damage done during the months or years in the mill usually can be overcome, but it takes time and dedication.

How do I handle my dog?

Many mill survivors have spent their entire lives in the mill. No romping around a living room playing with friends of the family for them. Puppies who grow up in a mill miss out on many crucial socialization periods with humans. They don't learn to trust, to love or to play. They have had very minimal physical contact with people. Many mills handle their "stock" by the scruff of the neck. No cuddling and kissing for them.

It is not uncommon for these survivors to be sensitive to the backs of their necks. Many mill dogs will try always face you, not trusting you enough to give you easy access to them from behind.

NEVER startle a mill survivor from behind — you will lose any trust that you may have gained.

Always make sure that your pet is anticipating you picking them up and consistently verbally tell them what you are going to do with the same word, like "up."

It is not uncommon for mill dogs to drop their bellies to the floor when they know you are going to pick them up. Some will even roll onto their backs in submission.

Always be gentle and try to avoid picking them up until you see that they are receptive to it. These dogs have to progress at their own pace. Anything you force them to do will not be pleasant to them.

How do I show my home to my dog?

Many times when you bring a mill survivor into your home, their instinct is to hide in a quiet corner. You may want to provide a crate as the dog's cave or safe haven to venture into if they feel scared or want to be alone. You should not bother a dog resting in a crate. The crate should be backed up to a wall or corner and in a central location.

The ideal spot is one where there is frequent walking and activity. This allows the dog to feel safe in the crate, yet observe everyday activity and become used to it. They need to hear the table being

set, the dishwasher running, phones ringing, and people talking. It is fine to cover the back half of the crate with a towel or blanket to give them a sense of security.

How do I tell others to approach my dog?

Let your dog approach the new person first.

If and when the dog approaches, ask your friend to talk quietly and hold out a hand. No quick movements. Ask that any barking be ignored. Remember that dogs bark to warn and scare off intruders. If you acknowledge the barking, you may be reinforcing it simply by giving attention. If you bring your guest outside to move away from the barking than you have just reinforced to your dog that barking will make the guest go away.

How do I get my dog to trust me?

A mill dog has no reason to trust you. Your trust needs to be earned, little by little. Patience is a very important part. Your dog may not eat when people are around.

- It is important that your mill dog be fed on a schedule, with you nearby. You don't have to stand and keep watch but should be in the same room. Your dog needs to know that meals come from you. For the majority of mill dogs, accepting a treat right out of your hand is a huge show of trust. Offer treats on a regular basis especially as a reward.
- Sit and talk quietly while gently petting or massaging your dog. It is best to do this in an area where the dog, not necessarily you, is the most comfortable. They probably won't like it at first, but will get used to it. Some dogs sadly, never do though, and we'll talk more about them later.
- Never allow friends to force attention on a mill survivor. Ask them not to look your dog directly in the eyes. It is not uncommon for mill dogs simply never to accept outsiders. Let your dog set the pace.
- No yelling at, rushing toward, raising hands, smacking, hitting, scruffing, spanking, rolling, muzzle grabbing. These will all be seen as personal assaults and worsen anxiety and possibly trigger defensive aggression. These dogs do not have a single clue about life in a home and gentle guidance is what will ultimately prevail ... set them up to succeed.

How do I house train my dog?

You have to UN-teach the dog something already learned to be acceptable. The dog was confined to a cage for his or her entire life and had to urinate and defecate in the cage, which makes house training trickier. A regular schedule, constant reinforcement, praise, and commitment on your part are a must! Would you ever scream at your children, march them to the bathroom and make them sit

on the toilet AFTER you discovered they soiled their diapers? A dog is no different in this sense. Scolding after the deed is done is of no benefit to anyone.

Get your new dog on a regular feeding pattern (which will establish a regular potty pattern) and observe closely after feeding time. Get them on a premium, all-natural dog food. This will produce a stool which normally is firm (very easy to clean up). One or two bowel movements a day is normal. Low-cost foods have a lot of fillers and it is very hard to get a dog on a regular cycle using these products.

Before you even begin to house train, you must the dog's schedule. Most dogs will need to "go" right after eating. As soon as they are finished eating, command "Outside". Always use the exact same word in the exact same tone. Watch them closely outside and observe their pattern as they prepare to defecate. Some will turn circles, some will scratch at the ground, some may find a corner, some may sniff every inch of the ground, some will get a strange look on their face ... every dog is different and you have to learn to recognize how the dog will behave right before he goes. This way you will recognize it when he gets ready to go in the house.

Clear an area in your home to which you will be able to confine your pup. People commonly use areas that have easy to clean surfaces such as the kitchen, bathroom, or laundry room. If you are not able to puppy-proof a single room, consider using baby gates or an x-pen to which you can restrict your dog. This limited area should contain his crate, a water dish, and a variety of toys (both interactive and chew toys).

Every dog is different. It may take a week, it may take a month, it may take a year ... and sadly, some dogs will never learn. Never give up and never accept "accidents" as a way of life. In most cases, the success of house-training depends on your commitment.

Constant routine and timing are both key factors to housebreaking because they provide predictability and reliability for both you and your dog. Keeping a log of your dog's feedings and outside bathroom breaks will also allow you to minimize accidents and reduce adaptation time.

Why does my dog urinate in different places in my home?

Your dog is marking. Puppy mill survivors all have one thing in common ... they were all used for breeding. A dog which marks its territory is "warning" other dogs that "this is my area ... stay away!" However, in a puppy mill situation, the dog's area is normally a 2x4 cage with other dogs in and around their "territory". It becomes a constant battle to establish territory and it is not uncommon to see both male and female survivors with marking problems.

The word "NO" will become your favorite word as you try to deal with the problem of dogs that mark. Don't be afraid to raise your voice and let the dog know that you are not happy. Always use the same word.

Dogs that are marking do not have to potty ... taking them outside will not help. You have to teach them that it is not acceptable to do this in the house. The only way to do this is to constantly show your disappointment and stimulate their need to "dominate" by taking them outside and even to areas where you know other dogs have been ... like the park or the nearest fire hydrant.

While you and your survivor learn about each other and your survivor develops a sense of respect for you, you will have to protect your home from the damage caused by marking. Here are a few tips that you will find helpful.

How do I protect my home from marking?

Urine spots should be soaked up with a paper towel, cleaned with whatever non-ammonia cleanser you use for that surface (vinegar is fine if you like it), and then a urine remover product (Anti Lcky Poo, Nature's Miracle, etc.) which has been formulated with enzymes or better yet, bacteria that metabolize organic wastes, should be used.

White vinegar is your best friend. Keep a spray bottle handy at all times. Use the vinegar anytime you see your dog mark. The vinegar will neutralize the smell that your dog just left behind. Using other cleaning products may actually cause your dog to mark over the same area again. Most cleaning products contain ammonia, the very scent found in urine. Your dog will feel the need to mark over normal cleaning products but normally has no interest in areas neutralized by vinegar. **"Potty Pads,"** your next best friend. These can be found in any pet store, but most "housebreaking pads" are treated with ammonia to encourage a puppy to go on the pad instead of the carpet. You might check at a home medical supply store. The blue and white pads used to protect beds usually work best. Staple, tape or pin these pads to any area that your dog is prone to mark (walls, furniture, etc.). Do not replace the pads when your dog soils them ... simply spray them down with vinegar. These are not a solution to the problem, but will help protect your home while you deal with the problem.

Scotchgard™ is really nothing more than a paraffin-based protector. It puts a waxy substance down which repels water and spills (and in this case, urine). You can make your own product by filling a spray bottle about 1/2 full of hot water. Shave off slivers of paraffin wax into the bottle (about 1/4 of a bar should be fine) and then microwave until you don't see the slivers anymore. Shake and spray this onto the fabric areas you want to protect, such as the base of the sofa and the carpet below doorways or areas your dog is apt to mark. It may make the area stiff feeling at first but it will normally "blend" in with normal household temperatures and humidity. (Note: This is also great for high traffic areas of your home or along the carpet in front of the couch).

Belly Bands: The motivation to mark will be greatest when a dog is first brought into the house and generally dissipates over time. Use a belly band for the first two weeks on your male dog. The goal in the first two weeks would not be to extinguish marking behavior. The goal would be to establish a relationship of trust between the dog and owner. If the owner is shouting at the dog (which also often comes with a rush toward the poor, unknowing creature), the relationship could be doomed before it even starts.

After two weeks, once a solid foundation has been made (the dog is learning people aren't scary and don't cause pain, they are consistent and predictable), then try leaving the belly band off for short periods. If you see sniffing or leg lifting, calmly call the dog away with a gentle tug on the leash. As the dog feels more comfortable with the owner, they can increase the volume of their voice for the reprimands or clap their hands.

Belly bands can be easily made at home out of things you probably already have. Depending on the size of your dog you can use the elastic end of your tube socks, the sleeve of a sweatshirt, etc. Simply fit the material to your dog and then place a female sanitary napkin under the penis.

Another easy way is to measure your dog, cut the fabric and sew on Velcro to hold it in place. There are also many sites on the Internet to order these if making them yourself is just not up your alley. Just remember to take the belly band off every time you bring your dog out to potty. Again, this is not a solution, but a protective measure.

How do I leash-train my dog?

Very few mill dogs know what a leash is. While being supervised, let them drag a leash around with them. Let them get used to the feel. This is very important. It is easy to fall into the mindset that they must be carried everywhere, but leash training is important. Plus cornering your dog to catch them when it's time to "go out" will terrify them. Then, in fear, the dog will sometimes growl or snap, which can rapidly devolve into a real crisis. It will make your life easier to have a leash-trained dog and it will also offer your dog confidence.

For the first few weeks, leave a lightweight leash attached to the dog when they take the dog out into the yard (even if it's fenced) and use it to maneuver the dog around the house as necessary, tethering the dog to furniture, etc. if needed to keep the dog near them. People tend to "rush" toward little dogs to scoop them up the minute they do something wrong. With a leash, the owners can calmly lead the dog away.

My dog whines, cries, and destroys my items when I leave. What do I do?

This is a common condition called :separation anxiety, where the dog is dependent on the presence of the owner and becomes uncomfortable and sometimes even severely destructive when left alone. Keeping the dog in his confined area of crate when you are at home can help prevent separation issues. This way the dog does not associate crate time with you leaving.

If you decide to feed your dog a special toy such as a stuffed Kong or rawhide, make sure also to offer the special toy when you are at home; otherwise the dog may make an association between the owner leaving and that toy. Dogs learn beautifully through repetition in patterns — consider the benefits and drawbacks of this element when raising your dog.

How do I crate train?

First off, make sure the dog has been walked, exercised, and gone to the bathroom before putting her in the crate. Never use the crate as punishment or your dog will be uncomfortable when you put her in the crate. Think of the crate as the dog's cave or safe haven.

Lure the dog into the crate with a treat and time how long she can stay within the area before becoming uncomfortable or anxious. Try to give the dog a rawhide chew or stuffed toy. This will not only allow the dog to keep busy, but will also form a positive association with the crate.

Record the amount of time the dog can be in the crate without whining, barking, howling, scratching at the pen, or excessively chewing. Begin systematically desensitizing the dog to the crate by taking the recorded time and beginning to leave the dog in there slightly below that tolerance threshold. This means that if the dog is content for 20 minutes, maybe begin leaving her in the crate for 15 minutes at a time. If the threshold is lower, such as 2 minutes, begin in second increments. Over a series of weeks, begin to slowly increase the amount of time you leave your dog in the crate. Eventually, your dog should be comfortable being in her own area for up to 5 hours. However, continue to leave the crate open in the penned area while training.

Why does my dog eat his or her poop?

Coprophagia is the technical term, but for the purpose of this article, we're just going to call it the "affliction". Dogs of all breeds, ages and sizes may have the affliction but in puppy mill rescues, it is not uncommon at all to find many of the dogs afflicted with this habit.

As in any habit, the cure lies in understanding the unacceptable behavior. Do not get upset about it. These dogs were poorly cared for and at some point were hungry and considered feces food. There are three primary reasons that puppy mill survivors are afflicted.

It tastes good and they are hungry! Rescues that have come from a mill where dogs were not fed properly often resort to eating their own or another dog's feces as a source of food. These types of situations will usually remedy themselves when the dog realizes that he is always going to get fed. It is also easy to discourage this behavior by adding over-the-counter products to the food which are manufactured for this purpose. Ask your vet what products are available and you will normally see results in 2-4 weeks.

Learned behavior. This is usually the cause for puppy mill dogs that have the affliction. There are several reasons why a dog learned to behave like this, but the most common cause is being housed with dominant dogs that fight over food. These dominant dogs will often guard the food dish and prevent the more submissive dogs from eating even if the dominant dog is not hungry. Food aggression in caged dogs is usually fast and furious and often results in injury to the submissive dogs. Because the dominant dog is often eating much more than is needed, the stool is virtually undigested and contains many of the nutrients and "flavors" as the original meal and is therefore almost as tasty to the submissive dog as if he'd ate the real thing. This eating pattern is usually maintained throughout the dog's life, so the age of your dog will play a big role in how hard it is to correct the behavior. It's become habit ... and as the saying goes, "Old habits are hard to break". It may take weeks or months before your dog "unlearns" to seek out stools.

How do I break this habit? The best way to prevent it is to immediately offer the dog a treat after defecating outside. This will pull its head away from the poop and redirect his or her attention. It is also a perfect way to reinforce good housetraining. Keeping a leash on to keep the dog away from the feces, as well as immediately cleaning it up, are also excellent ways to help extinguish this behavior.

Why is my dog eating rocks, dirt, and sticks?

Pica is the unnatural “need” to eat foreign objects. Dogs suffering from Pica will eat rocks, dirt, sticks, etc. Remember the kid in school who ate paste and chalk and other “unspeakables”? Pica is a psychological disorder which is very in depth and serious.

If you are the owner of a dog that you believe suffers from Pica, consult your vet. These dogs often require medication for their disorder and only your vet can guide you on the best way to proceed. True Pica is rare. Most dogs will chew on sticks or rocks ... or sofas and table legs. However, a dog suffering from Pica will not just chew on these items. They will eat these items any chance they get. Just because your dog is eating his own stool (and also the bar stool at the kitchen counter) does not mean that he is suffering from Pica. If in doubt, consult your vet.

I’m scared because I think my dog has serious problems.

Occasionally, there is the survivor who has survived the mill, but at such a great cost that they can never be “brought around.” These are the dogs that have endured so much suffering that they remind us of children who are abused who survive by separating their mind from the body. They will never fully trust anyone. So where does that leave these poor souls?

Most are still capable of living out a wonderful life. They need a scheduled environment but most importantly, a home where they are accepted for who and what they are. They may never jump up on a couch and cuddle with you, or bring you a ball to play catch. But you will see the joy that they take in living each day knowing that they will have clean bedding, fresh food and water, and unconditional love. To them, those small comforts alone are pure bliss.

Compiled with the help of authors Michelle Bender and Kim Townsend, trainer Charlotte Wagner with K9 Paws, and Kathy Meyers, VMD with Veterinary Behavior Clinic.