



Abused Dog?

Canine Behavior Series

People commonly assume their new dogs who come with unknown histories have been victims of abuse. Though a dog's behavior may seem to point to it, most of these dogs have not been abused. Whether or not abuse has occurred, the assumption can prevent people from giving their dogs the right support for success in a new chance at life.

What Has this Dog Been Through?

Dogs reared as puppies with perfect handling seldom land in need of adoption through shelters and rescues. This does not mean a dog is a poor risk for adoption. It does mean you should expect to work with the dog to overcome past deficits.

Socialization is an often unmet need in a dog who gives the impression of prior abuse. To become the most confident adult dog, a puppy needs to be positively exposed to a wide variety of people, places and things when young. These experiences build a puppy's belief in being able to cope with the world.

A puppy who doesn't have this variety of positive experiences can become fearful or aggressive toward many situations in adolescence and adulthood. When the dog behaves badly toward something, it's easy to jump to the conclusion this thing has been involved with prior abuse. More likely, the pup didn't get enough experience with this situation and is afraid simply because it's strange.

Some dogs have had socialization experiences, but they were frightening. Another dog may have attacked or scared the pup. People may have handled outings badly, so now the dog expects bad things to happen on outings. Going out expecting trouble can bring trouble.

A dog who reacts badly to children may have been teased by kids over a backyard fence. Some strange dynamic makes children think a barking dog "deserves" to be teased, and then of course the dog gets even more upset. The results are bad for both kids and dogs.

Adults are often guilty of teasing confined dogs, too. Especially problematic is the dog stuck on a tie-out with other dogs and humans in the vicinity causing frustration. This can wreak havoc with a dog's temperament.

The tie-out can have similar effects to protection training not done well. People sometimes mess up this training in misguided efforts to gain personal security from their dogs. When a dog has been taught to use teeth against people without having the proper temperament and training, the dog may act in ways that make people assume prior abuse.

People in the home, especially the children, may handle a dog thoughtlessly, not intending abuse. Whether or not this treatment constitutes abuse depends on your point of view.

The same is true for harsh training people may have resorted to from frustration and poor information when dealing with normal dog behavior. Housetraining, puppy nipping, and adolescent destructive chewing are all opportunities to build a good relationship with a young dog—or to cause harm to the dog's mind.

When a dog has too many bad experiences of this world and too few good ones, it's understandable that the dog doesn't expect good things. You want your dog to trust humans, be confident around other dogs, and to generally have good self-esteem. The wrong start in life may have taken some of those things from this dog. Temperament weaknesses from the dog's genetic heritage may play a big role, too.

A New Start

Dogs are remarkable for their adaptability. When a dog moves to your home, the dog is open to learning new rules and getting to know new people. If you have the ability to fulfill the needs of the dog you chose, the dog will quickly recognize that.

What are those needs? The answer will surprise you. The dog coming to you from a bad start in life will not benefit from your having low expectations.

Select a dog not out of pity, but because you like and admire this dog. Get your dream dog. This dog's behavior may be rough around the edges and the body in need of tender loving care. Evaluate honestly

whether you're equipped to provide that care.

It's not helping a dog for you to adopt and then not be able to afford veterinary treatment. It's also essential that you can make the commitment to the training this dog needs. Otherwise, let someone else adopt the dog. Pick a breed or mix you know is right for you and an individual dog you would have chosen in other circumstances. Make sure the timing is right for you to take on the responsibility of a dog.

Thinking a dog has been abused can become an emotional trap that causes people to adopt dogs they can't afford to properly care for or don't have time to train. Whether or not there has been abuse, a dog in need of a home needs the right home. Sometimes the way for you to help a dog is to find the perfect human match for that dog.

The abuse notion hurts a dog if it results in human actions motivated by pity that don't give the dog needed care. Remember that most of these dogs are in dire need of training, and will be more difficult to train than if they hadn't had a bad start. Don't adopt the dog with the idea that your home is better than the previous one, because "anything would be better than that." Help get the dog into a home that fits.

The Real Abuse Victim

In cases where it's known the dog was abused, either from witnesses or from physical damage a veterinarian can assess, the dogs often do well. You want to show this dog that humans are fair, kind, and trustworthy—unlike the people in the past.

To a dog, part of what makes someone trustworthy is that the person lives by consistent rules. Dogs thrive on limits and feel more secure with these clear parameters. Don't make the mistake of removing structure and training from the life of a dog who has been abused. That is not a kindness.

Dogs need to feel necessary. They need to feel they can enhance their own security by their actions. Think about this when you consider adopting a dog who has had a bad start in life, whether or not it's known the dog was abused.

If you adopt, will it be because in some way you need this dog? Can you provide this dog with a good life? Purpose can be the path to healing both body and mind, for dogs as well as humans.

Include expert evaluation of the dog in your adoption decision. Veterinary examination and expert behavior evaluation are both important. Neither evaluation can be absolutely conclusive, but can catch a lot of problems you'd miss on your own. If you go ahead with the adoption, you'll be able to better meet the dog's needs right from the start.

If a dog has been abused, neglected, or victim to unintended mistreatment, don't let the past define that dog's future. What we say of people, that the best aid is "a hand up, not a handout" is also true of dogs.

Kathy Diamond Davis is the author of the book [Therapy Dogs: Training Your Dog to Reach Others](#). Should the training articles available here or elsewhere not be effective, contact your veterinarian. Veterinarians not specializing in behavior can eliminate medical causes of behavior problems. If no medical cause is found, your veterinarian can refer you to a colleague who specializes in behavior or a local behaviorist.

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