

# Tips on Fostering/Adopting Puppy Mill Dogs

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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 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, cues, confidence, housetraining, and so on. The more the dog has on her “resume,” the more likely a dog is to be adopted and the happier the dog will be in her new world also.

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/trauma 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 a favorite saying: “You can heal the wounds, but the scars often remain forever.” We can’t change their past but we can build their confidence and make sure their life is great from now on and that they can learn to do things that most dogs enjoy like walks, attention, human companionship, play and more!

Another great saying with mill dogs is “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 large group of dogs even sharing kennel space with other dogs 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 other dogs at times, they seem to thrive with a canine buddy. Dogs do mimic behavior so living with another dog can teach them about their new life. We have seen this again and again.

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

**Use a long line for safety** For the dog’s safety and your peace of mind, keep her on a long leash at all times including outside in a fenced yard. (For safety reasons, do not leave a dog unattended in a secure location indoors). A frightened dog often tries to run away, but chasing her only makes her more fearful. Instead, if she tries to flee, 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 pause/wait when startled.

**Fences** Check that all fencing is secure. Also, every mill dog should initially be on a long line, *even when outdoors as stressed above*, 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 under or over a fence to get away.

**Crate** Make sure your puppy mill dog has a crate. So often we hear: “But she spent her 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 she’s never experienced a home environment, a crate is essential for her safety. She hasn’t learned not to dash out the door. Safety first! The crate also makes it easier to teach her manners as well as to become housetrained.

**Feeding** Feed the dog in her crate. Living in a mill cage with limited resources can cause some competition over meal time. This can be very stressful for the new dog or existing dogs in the household. Meal time should never be competitive. Also if your mill dogs shared space with other dogs she may not feel comfortable eating around new dogs. 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. Feeding on a plate or softer surface initially can help with this fear.

**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 trash cans 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.

**Walking your Dog** If you don't have another dog, consider walking with a neighbor or neighbor's dog to help your mill dog. Walking with another dog that is confident seems to be helpful for the dog. I also double leash (2 leashes - 1 with a harness, 1 with a collar) all mill dogs initially on walks.

**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** Most 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 her 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 with 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 joint supplements can also help ease sore joints as the dog ages.

**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 a 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, she may never be caught again!* Collars must be tight. It's recommended that you initially use *both* a collar *and* a harness for safety as noted above 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!

**Where should your mill dog sleep?** Putting a crate in your bedroom and near your bed if possible is a good idea. This way the dog can hear you and smell you and get to "know" you in a quiet environment without too much social pressure.

**Touching/picking up the dog** Try massage/Tellington Touch. 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, without picking up the dog. Most have never been held or were only held and picked up for negative experiences. If you must pick up your dog, make sure she can see you picking her 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 to avoid jumping out of your arms. Some dogs never learn to feel safe or enjoy being picked up due to their past.

**Attention** The dog's whole life up to this point has been built around survival only. It's your job to keep her safe and secure while she 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 and leave even for short trips or to go to work. Get your new dog used to some quiet alone time from the start. 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 a 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 cues like "wait" and "touch/target" – 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](http://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 her adjust to living outside the four walls of the mill. Predictability helps reduce stress.

**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 for 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. A great website at which you can educate yourself about how the pet stores, brokers and millers operate is [www.nowisconsinpuppymills.org](http://www.nowisconsinpuppymills.org). It is imperative for us to speak for those who can't speak for themselves. We must educate people as puppy mill often advertise or sell at flea markets, pet stores but also online.

Puppy mill dogs are innocent victims in a world run by greed! Adopting and working with 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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