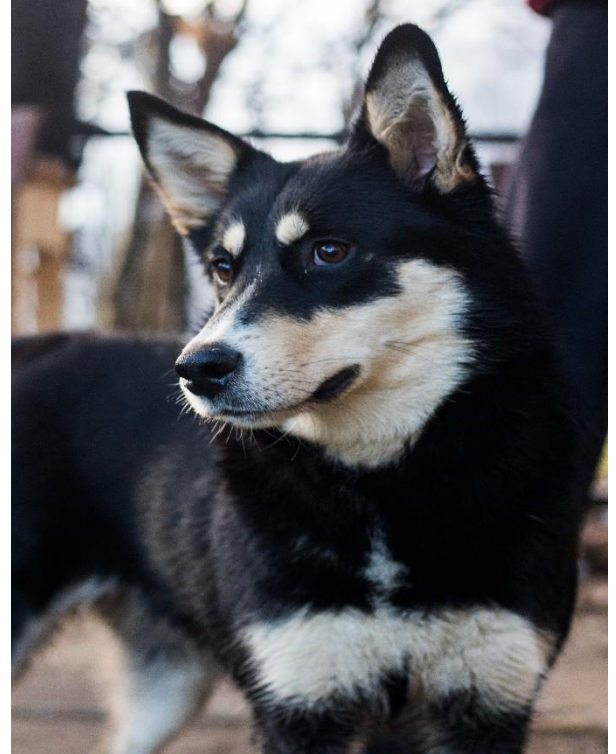


Adopting a Dog from a Free-Roam Lifestyle

Many of the dogs in our care at Toronto Humane Society have had lifestyles very different to that of the typical urban canine. They might be from northern communities where they led a mostly outdoor existence, roaming free and hunting with other dogs, or from southern regions, living on the street and scavenging for food. Not surprisingly, the transition from one lifestyle to another that is radically different can be difficult for many of them, causing anxiety and fear, even more so if they are under social to begin with. As well, dogs from a free-roam lifestyle may resource guard, house soil, and display escape behaviours. It is not unusual for them to be anxious initially with indoor confinement and being left alone. They need time, patience, and compassionate training to learn new ways.



What is under social behaviour?

Dogs that have led a free-roam lifestyle may not have had the chance to be appropriately socialized.

Socialization is a continuing process whereby a dog, usually at a young age, learns which behaviours and social skills are appropriate and acceptable in a domestic environment. We expose them to novel experiences in an enjoyable way so they develop a positive association to new things.

However, dogs that were never introduced to a wide variety of new experiences, or have had only negative associations with those experiences, can grow up under social — which can include the following behaviours:

- Fearful body language, such as lowered body posture, pinned ears, tucked tail, whale eye, raised hackles, growling, barking
- Avoidant or reactive behaviour when being reached for, handled, or restrained: they may back away, turn away, tremble, pant, growl, bark or snap
- Avoidant (moving away, bolting) or reactive responses (barking, lunging) when encountering unfamiliar people, dogs, noises, objects, situations and environments
- Shut-down body language when encountering unfamiliar people, dogs, noises, objects, situations and environments: flattening to the ground, freezing, hunching over, not giving eye contact, seeking hiding places, unable to respond to encouragement
- Leash frustration, causing the dog to be hectic or reactive on leash, possibly because they are unaccustomed to being on a tether

How can you help an under-socialized dog?

- Go slow: Understand that the dog needs to acclimate to their new world gradually while also developing trust in you.
- Respect their personal space: this may mean minimal handling of the dog at first, until they indicate they are receptive to more interaction.



- Use high-value treats frequently to build a positive association between you and the dog.
- Identify what circumstances trigger anxiety and fear in the dog and try to avoid or minimize exposing the dog to them.
- Be calm, supportive and consistent in all your interactions with the dog.
- Desensitize and counter-condition the dog to the unfamiliar things it fears: With patient, incremental exposure to new people, places, objects, noises, and situations, always paired with something the dog considers rewarding, you can gradually build their confidence and resilience, socializing them to tolerate and eventually enjoy novel situations. (See [Fearful Dog](#) for more information on fearful body language, triggers and building confidence.)

Free roam may equal flight risk

Your free-roam dog is a higher “flight risk,” meaning they may display escape behaviours. They may attempt to bolt out of exits in the home, yards, or away from the handler in other situations. This is usually caused by the dog’s extreme nervousness, often provoked by something unfamiliar and frightening, such as traffic noise or fireworks.

Safe management of flight risk dogs includes:

- Ensuring your dog wears a secure collar (i.e., Martingale collar) and possibly a body harness as back up. This way, you can attach 2 leashes, providing two points of contact for walks
- No off-leash walking
- No dog parks
- Securely fenced yard
- Monitoring exits in the home, ensuring the dog cannot bolt out
- Monitoring exits in the car, ensuring the dog cannot bolt out
- Using safe and suitable method of confinement/containment when unsupervised (a Toronto Humane Society certified trainer can assist in determining the most appropriate set up for a specific dog’s needs)
- Supervising the dog when not confined
- Keeping a leash on the dog inside the home during their transition period
- Providing supplementary enrichment, such as calming music, stuffed Kongs, a variety of toys, etc. Adaptil is a synthetic canine pheromone therapy thought to have a calming effect on dogs by diffusing or spraying the scent in their living areas. There is some debate as to whether or not it works¹, but some owners claim that it has had a profound effect on reducing their dog’s fear.

As well as preventing flight risk opportunities, you can work on encouraging confidence in the dog, as described above. Building a bond of trust is key, so the dog learns over time to focus on you rather than their triggers, gradually acclimatizing to their new surroundings and, in particular, becoming desensitized to the things they fear.

Potential for resource guarding

Dogs that have not had access to adequate food and water and are accustomed to scavenging for their food or having to protect it from other animals can show resource guarding behaviour in the home. When presented with food, they may eat ravenously and escalate to actually guarding what they consider a precious resource if people approach their food bowl or attempt to take it. If resource guarding manifests in the home, careful food management will be required, including providing the dog with space and privacy to eat, and placing and removing the bowl when the



dog is well away from it. Caution may be required with high-value treats, such as long-lasting chews or bones, toys, and other items that the dog deems special. Dogs may even become possessive of spaces they prize, such as a sofa or human bed. (See *Resource Guarding* for more information.) Resource guarding can be modified, with the help of a Toronto Humane Society certified trainer.

Prepare to house train

A dog that has lived outdoors much of the time will likely need house training to learn where it is appropriate to do their business and where it is not.

- A predictable routine of walks/bathroom breaks is key, coupled with praise and high-value food rewards given as soon as the dog eliminates outside.
- It may also help to confine the dog when you are not home (in a crate or other sanctuary space).
- When you are home, supervise the dog at all times so you can take them out as soon as you see signs of their need to eliminate (circling, approaching the door etc.).

Confinement and departure anxiety

It is not uncommon for dogs from a free-roam lifestyle to initially be uncomfortable with confinement, be that in a crate, a sanctuary room, or even the home itself. They may vocalize (whine, bark, howl), inappropriately eliminate, become destructive, and seek to escape. Without knowing their specific backgrounds, we can assume they may not have lived indoors on a regular basis or at all and will need to adjust to this big change. In addition, some free-roam dogs also become anxious when left alone. We can help them with the transition:

- Introduce them in baby steps to a form of confinement, using positive reinforcement, such as feeding them their meals in the space, tossing in treats and long-lasting stuffed Kongs. Begin with very brief periods of confinement, letting them out before they display any anxious behaviours.
- Practise departure training, getting the dog used to your absence while you are elsewhere in the home before moving on to absences outside the home. Consult a Toronto Humane Society certified trainer for more details on departure training.

References

1Frank, D., Beauchamp, G., & Palestrini, C. (2010). Systematic review of the use of pheromones for treatment of undesirable behavior in cats and dogs. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 236(12), 1308-1316.

