

## Adopting a Dog from a Hoarding Situation

The dog you are adopting has come from a hoarding situation. We do not always have a detailed history of these dogs, but it is common for dogs in hoarding situations to be kept indoors with multiple dogs or other animals, either running free or restricted to cages or other types of confinement with unsanitary living conditions. With little or no exposure to other environments and people, they are considered under social and their transition to the shelter and new homes is very stressful, meaning they are likely to display anxious and fearful behaviours, including those described below:



### What is under social behaviour?

Dogs from a hoarding situation have not had the chance to be appropriately socialized. Socialization is a continuing process whereby a dog, usually at a very 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 instead of feeling fear.

However, dogs that have had minimal exposure to 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, trembling, panting, etc., when encountering unfamiliar people, dogs, noises, objects, situations, and environments.
- Shut-down body language in unfamiliar circumstances: flattening to the ground, freezing, hunching over, making no eye contact, seeking hiding places, unable to respond to encouragement.
- Bolting, escaping the situation (see “Flight Risk” below).
- Avoidant of being reached for, touched or picked up: they may back away, turn away, tremble, pant, freeze

### How can you help an under-socialized dog?

- Go slow: Understand that change is scary to dogs that have lived only in one environment and they need to acclimate to their new world gradually while developing trust in you.
- Provide them with a sanctuary space, such as a crate, x-pen, or other cozy enclosure, where they can feel safe as they learn to integrate into the home.
- 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 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.
- Establish a predictable routine for the dog.
- In time, it may be possible to 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 may be able to 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.)

### Flight risk

With the radical change in their environment, hoarding dogs are understandably very scared when being introduced to new places and situations. Since their level of fear is so high, they are considered a “flight risk,” meaning they may display escape behaviours. They may attempt to bolt out of exits, yards, or away from the handler. These episodes are caused by the dog’s extreme nervousness, usually provoked by sights and sounds unfamiliar and frightening to them. 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, creating two points of contact for walks
- No off-leash walking
- No dog parks
- Securely fenced yard
- Keeping a leash on the dog inside the house during their transition period
- Monitoring exits in the home, ensuring the dog cannot bolt out
- Monitoring exits in the car, ensuring the dog cannot bolt out
- Using a 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
- Providing a calming home environment and supplementary enrichment: soothing 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 works<sup>1</sup>, but some owners claim that it has had a profound effect on reducing their dog’s fear.

### Prepare to house train

Dogs that previously lived in a hoarding situation most likely did not have restrictions on where they were allowed to eliminate, meaning they will go anywhere as needed. This makes house training challenging. A predictable routine of walks/bathroom breaks is key, coupled with praise and high-value food rewards immediately delivered when the dog successfully eliminates outside. It may also help to confine the dog when you are not home and to always supervise them when you are home so you can take them out as soon as you see signs of needing to eliminate (circling, approaching the door, etc.).



## Consider a companion dog

A dog that's been in a hoarding environment may be bonded to another dog from the same situation and may benefit from remaining with that buddy when adopted. As well, studies show that dogs from a hoarding situation tend to come out of their shell more easily when paired with another dog in the household that is confident and well socialized. The household dog can show them how to interact with humans and become affectionate with them, as well as ease their transition period and even help with house training.

## Compulsive and destructive behaviours

Dogs from a hoarding situation may display repetitive compulsive behaviors such as licking themselves excessively, pacing, and spinning in circles. It is thought that they develop these types of behaviour as a way of coping with a very stressful situation that causes them anxiety, fear and frustration. For the same reasons, they may also exhibit destructive behaviours, such as chewing on inappropriate objects. Even when removed from the hoarding environment, these dogs can continue to display these behaviour patterns and will need patient, compassionate support as they learn to trust, feel safe, and offer alternative behaviours with positive reinforcement.

## Departure anxiety

It is not uncommon for some dogs from a hoarding environment to develop increased attachment and attention-seeking behaviours with their owners, having been previously deprived of human companionship. As a result, they can become anxious when left alone. The presence of a buddy dog may help with this, as well as gradual departure training:

- Practise getting the dog comfortable with your absence in tiny, incremental steps. Start doing this when you are at home before moving on to gradual departures outside the home. Consult a Toronto Humane Society certified trainer for more details on helping with departure anxiety.

## Decreased trainability

Dogs that have been in a hoarding environment tend to have lower trainability than dogs brought up in a safe environment. This is due to the tremendous amount of fear and stress they were experiencing in the hoarding situation, limiting their ability to focus, follow rules or direction, and problem solve.

With dogs that have learning/training difficulties due to hoarding, owners must ensure they do not use intimidation when teaching them. This can be very detrimental to their welfare and contribute to setbacks and increased fear. Instead, we help them to learn through positive reinforcement, using praise, play, toys, freedom, and high-value food rewards after a wanted behaviour is displayed. This serves to strengthen the animal-human bond.

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### 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.

<https://resources.bestfriends.org/article/understanding-caring-rescued-hoarded-dogs>

<https://thebark.com/content/behavior-hoarding-victims>

