

Rehabilitation of a Puppy Mill Dog

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Dolly was rescued from a puppy mill auction and now lives a blessed life with her adoptive family.

Disclaimer: The following is the opinions of the authors and is based on years of experience with puppy mill dogs. We are not veterinarians or professional trainers. Please note that an adopted puppy mill rescue may be at different stages of rehab so we have tried to start from the beginning. Permission is granted to use this article on your website or in print, as long as nothing is edited.

The Puppy Mill Survivor

Every mill survivor is different. What works on one or many, will completely fail on others. The only thing that is consistent is that they will need lots of patience, understanding, love, and probably most importantly, unconditional acceptance of what they are and what their limitations may be.

At first glance a mill survivor may look like many of your friends' dogs; maybe not a perfect example of the breed, but close. What you won't see is the condition they were in when they came into rescue. Many have fur so matted that it all had to be shaved off and even the short-haired breeds suffer from thin dull coats. Many times removing the filth and matting reveal open sores, usually from flea allergies or sarcoptic mange. Ear mites, yeast infections, bacterial infections and fungal infections are common in the ears, and some survivors suffer from permanent hearing loss from years of neglect. Most survivors require the removal of rotten teeth, even young dogs. The gums are usually very infected and the teeth have excessive buildup of tartar on them. Many vets who are not familiar with puppy mill rescues will miscalculate the age of the dog if using only the teeth as their guide. Many survivors also suffer from swollen, splayed and sore feet from living on wire flooring.



These are just a few of the external problems found in mill survivors and can be remedied with grooming and veterinary care, but all too often there remains the psychological damage that can take years to fix.

We would love to say that every puppy mill survivor needs only love to turn it into a wonderful family pet, but that would be a lie. Love is definitely needed, but so is patience and understanding. The psychological damage done during the years in the mill can usually be overcome, but it takes time and dedication.

It takes a very special adopter for one of these dogs. Not being "up to it" is no crime, but you need to be honest with yourself and the rescue group about your expectations. These dogs have already been through more than their share of heartache and if your entire family is not willing to make the commitment, the dog is better off staying with its rescuers until the perfect home is found.

Handling

Many mill survivors have spent their entire life in the mill with only an elevated wire cage to call home. Puppies that grow up in a mill will miss out on many crucial socialization periods with humans; they never learn to trust, to love, or to play. They have had very minimal physical contact with

people and have virtually no concept of what to expect (or what is expected of them) when they are placed in a family situation. Their life in the mill may have been what we would consider unpleasant, but it is the only life they have ever known. In the mill, they were probably fed and watered using automatic dispensers and their feces and urine was only cleaned after it fell through the wire that they lived on. Actual human contact normally came when they were being vaccinated, dewormed, or moved to a new cage to breed or to whelp puppies.

Many of the quirks that mill dogs have will be discovered while the dog is still in rescue but there are things that may develop after the dog feels a little more comfortable in your home. Most of the dogs have had their spirit and their "fight" broken many years before and aggression is not normally something seen in mill rescues. There are many memory triggers that the dog may experience after it is settled in your home, and some of these may spark an aggressive response, so we will talk briefly about these.

Aggression

The physical contact that the dogs have received probably has not been pleasant. Many mills handle their "stock" by the scruff of the neck. It is not uncommon for these survivors to be sensitive to the backs of their necks; after all, it brings the unexpected. Many mill dogs will try to 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 they are anticipating you picking them up and consistently tell them what you are going to do with the same word, like "up". It is not uncommon for a mill dog to drop to their bellies when they know you are going to pick them up, some will even roll on their backs, often urinating in the process. This is a submissive move on the dog's part, and while it may be frustrating trying to pick up a dog in this position, these dogs are normally submissive. Caution should be taken, as many of the dogs are fear-biters and may display submission until they realize that their only other defense is aggression.



It is okay to go ahead and pick up a dog while they are in the submissive position, but if time is not of the essence, encourage the dog to come to you by sitting a few feet away and calling him. The most common posture seen in mill dogs is the "freeze;" the dog will initially try to escape you, but when they realize there is no escape, they simply freeze up -- rigid, like a statue -- and accept their "fate." This is a good time to really praise the dog by scratching the back or ears and speaking softly to him -- it goes a long way towards teaching him that human contact can be a good thing.

Learning About the House

Many times when you bring a mill survivor into your home, it is their instinct to hide in a quiet corner. Any new dog that you bring into your home should be kept separated from other family pets for 10 days. During this time it is fine to crate or confine them to a quiet area.

After the initial confinement, the dog will need to have exposure to the household. If crating, the crate should be 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 accustomed to it. Remember that every noise is foreign and scary to them.



They need to hear the table being set, the dishwasher running, the phone ringing, and people talking. This phase of acclimation can last for days or for weeks, and when you begin to see the dog show

curiosity to its surroundings, you can begin the process of allowing him to roam the house -- but always keep his safety net (the crate) accessible to him.

During the crate-phase, it is of course necessary to allow the dog access to an area where he can relieve himself. At this point, housebreaking should not even be considered. Very few mill dogs know what a leash is so we recommend putting the dog outside in a secure area at regular intervals during the day.

When you feel you are gaining trust, you can supervise the dog outside while a leash is clipped on to his collar. Dragging the leash freely will give the dog time to adjust and when you feel he is comfortable with the leash on, you can slowly start grabbing the other end of the leash and letting the dog feel the tension. Leash training in a mill dog is not like leash training a puppy. Allowing the dog to fight the leash is counter-productive as they are experts in long-term suffering and the more unpleasant something is, the more they will resent it and fight it. If the dog begins to resist when he feels tension on the leash, simply drop the leash and allow him to go back to dragging it. In time you will find less resistance, and while it may take weeks or even months, leash breaking is one of the easiest tasks you and your new dog will face. Leash breaking is essential to overall recovery of a mill rescue. Do not fall into the trap of carrying your dog everywhere, or you will simply become a replacement security blanket to the cage they lived their whole lives in, and the crate that you are trying to break them of.

Gaining Trust

A mill dog has no reason to trust you. Your trust needs to be earned, little by little. Patience is a very important part of rehabbing a mill survivor. One of the first major obstacles you may encounter is getting your dog to eat.

It is not uncommon to hear from adopters that their mill-dog will not eat. The truth of the matter is that most of these dogs have spent their lives eating in solitude and simply do not want to eat while you are in the room. If your dog is healthy (and presumably, the rescuer has assured this prior to adoption) you should discourage this behavior from the beginning. It is important that your dog be fed on a schedule, with you nearby. You don't have to stand and watch over them but you should be in the same room with them. They need to know that their yummy meal is coming from you. If your dog does not eat within a reasonable amount of time, simply pull the food bowl back up and offer it again at the next feeding.

It is okay to supplement your dog's diet as he transitions to a normal eating pattern. For the majority of mill dogs, accepting a treat right out of your hand is a major milestone. Offer treats on a regular basis, first by hand, and then by setting them in the food bowl if the dog will not accept the treat from your hand. Remember, something as natural as eating is a step in gaining your trust!



While you shouldn't force your affections upon your dog, it does need to get used to you. Sit and talk quietly while gently petting or massaging your dog. It is best to do this in an area where *they*, not necessarily *you*, are the most

comfortable. They probably won't like it at first, but give them time to adjust. Some dogs sadly, never will adjust, 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 to never accept outsiders. Let your dog set the pace. If the dog approaches, ask them to talk quietly and hold out a hand. No quick movements. Ask that any barking be ignored. Remember that these dogs bark to warn and scare off intruders, or what they perceive to be intruders. If you acknowledge the barking you are reinforcing it. Do not put your dog outside, or walk outside or into a different room with your guests to get away from the barking. Doing this only teaches your dog that barking "scares away those horrible intruders."

Housebreaking

A child spends the first one to two years of their life soiling their diaper and having you remove the dirty diaper and replace it with a clean one. A puppy mill dog spends its entire life soiling its living area and having that area cleaned by the puppy miller. Potty training a child and housebreaking a puppy mill dog are the exact same concept -- you are UN-teaching them something that they have already learned to be acceptable. A regular schedule, constant reinforcement, praise, and commitment on your part are a must! Would you ever scream at your child, march them to the bathroom and make them sit on the toilet AFTER you discovered they soiled their diaper? A dog is no

different in this sense; scolding them after the deed is done is of no benefit to anyone.

The two most important things you can do are to get your new dog on a regular feeding schedule (which will put them on a regular potty schedule) and to observe them closely after feeding time to learn their behavior patterns when they need to relieve themselves.

Getting them on a premium, low residue food is very important. This will produce a stool that normally is firm (very easy to clean up), with only one or two bowel movements a day. Low cost, or over-the-counter foods have a lot of fillers and it is very hard to get a dog on a regular cycle using these foods.

Before you even begin to housebreak them, you must learn their 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.

We could give you a million tips that other adopters have found to work best for them, but as we have said, every dog is different. As long as you always keep in mind that housebreaking a dog and potty training a child are one in the same. Never do to a

dog what you would not do to a child. 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 housebreaking depends on your commitment.



While we have focused mainly on bowel

movements, urinating in the house is just as hard to correct as defecating in the house (if not worse). If you achieve success in getting your dog to defecate outside, but urinating in the house remains a problem, we highly recommend crate training. This can be researched online in more detail, but if crate training is not working because your dog is soiling in the crate, you should discontinue the training immediately, as you are only reinforcing that it is okay to soil their area.

In general, if you can understand your dog's bowel patterns, you will usually find that they urinate immediately before or immediately after a bowel movement. Reinforce the positive and work on the negative, as most dogs will understand "*outside*" and associate it with both urinating and defecating. Of course, in the meantime, you will want to protect your carpets by either removing throw rugs or confining the dog to an uncarpeted area when you aren't

holding it on your lap. This should only be done during the training process, as socialization is just as important as house training and often tiled floors are in areas that we don't normally spend a lot of time.

Marking

Puppy mill survivors all have one thing in common...they were all used for breeding. A dog that marks its territory is 'warning' other dogs that this is its 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 of establishing territory and it is not uncommon to see male and female survivors with marking problems.

Normally, marking is seen in dogs with a dominant nature. This is good in the sense that these dogs can normally withstand verbal correction better than submissive dogs. 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 exact same word and don't follow 'NO' with "now what has mommy told you about that, you bad dog!"

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 allowing them more time 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 towards you, you will have to protect your home from the damage caused by marking. Here are a few tips that you will find helpful.

1. 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.

2. 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; since we are trying to discourage your dog from marking, these aren't always the best choice. 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 (white side facing outward) to any area that your dog is prone to mark (walls, furniture, etc.). Do not replace the pads every time 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.

3. Scotch Guard™. Scotch Guard™ is really nothing more than paraffin based repellent. It puts a waxy substance down that repels water and spills (and in our 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 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). After the first use, you will need to microwave the bottle and immerse the spray mechanism in a bowl of hot water so that any wax residue will melt.

With the use of vinegar and/or homemade Scotch Guard™, you should test a small hidden area of the fabric/fiber that you will be using the product on to make sure it does not discolor, stain, or bleed.

4. Belly Bands. Sometimes these can be a (male) mill dog owner's best friend. 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 husband's tube socks, the sleeve of 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. 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 while your dog un-learns his marking behavior.

Coprophagia

Poo-poo, shoo-shoo, ca-ca, doo-doo, #2, feces, poop, stool -- whatever 'pet' name you give it, it's still gross! But nothing is grosser than owning a dog that eats poop! Coprophagia is the veterinary term for dogs that eat feces, but for the purpose of this article, we're just going to call it the 'affliction.'

Dogs of all breeds, ages and backgrounds have the affliction but in puppy mill rescues it is a



very common behavior. As with any bad habit, the cure lies in understanding why the dog does it.

There are three primary reasons that a puppy mill survivor is afflicted. We'll start with the most common, and easiest to remedy.

1. 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 other dogs' 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 their food that are manufactured for this purpose and give the feces a bitter taste. Ask your vet which products are available and you will normally see results in 2-4 weeks.

2. Learned behavior. This is usually the cause of 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 severe 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' of the original meal and therefore almost as tasty to the submissive dog as if he'd ate the real thing. Puppies that were raised with a dominant mother or dominant litter mates also pick up this habit very early -- in this case, it is a little harder to treat, but it can usually be done.

The affliction has usually occurred throughout most of a 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."

Dogs with the affliction will actually go hunting for a fresh stool when you take them outside. The key is to give your dog something better to hunt for. Microwave some unbuttered/unsalted popcorn and sprinkle it on the lawn before taking your dog out in the morning; a handful is usually suffice, and you should decrease the amount as you notice your dog actively searching for the popcorn in the yard. We can almost guarantee that once your dog has learned to search out the popcorn, he'll pass those fresh turds right up! It may take weeks or months before your dog 'unlearns' to seek out feces but most dogs are receptive to the popcorn training. You may have to sprinkle the lawn with popcorn the rest of your dog's life but the trouble is well worth just one 'popcorn kiss' as opposed to a lick on the face right after he eats a tasty turd.

3. As mentioned above, Coprophagia means 'eating poop'. Coprophagia is a form of a much more serious problem called Pica. Pica is the unnatural 'need' to eat foreign objects. Dogs suffering from Pica will eat not only stools, but rocks, dirt, sticks, etc. Remember the kid in school who ate paste and chalk and 'other unspeakables'? Pica is a

psychological disorder which is much more in depth and serious than anything we can discuss in this guide.

A good rescuer will observe dogs prior to placement and will recognize the seriousness of this problem. A dog suffering from Pica should never be placed in an inexperienced home or any home that is not aware of the problem and the dangers. Dogs suffering from Pica will often end up having surgery to remove objects they have eaten that can not be digested. If you are the owner of a dog that you believe suffers from Pica, you should consult your vet; these dogs often require medication for their disorder and only your vet can guide you on the best way to proceed.

Before we close this section on Pica, we want to say that true Pica is rare. Most dogs will chew on sticks or rocks -- or sofas and table legs. 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.

The "Special" Ones

Occasionally, we see the dog that 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, and survive by separating their mind from the body. These damaged dogs 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.



These "broken ones" are the ones that normally never leave their foster homes. Ironically, these types of dogs

normally do very well in a group-dog setting. They seem to

have shunned the world, and most certainly mankind, and have created their own little world without humans. Normally, when a rescue group suspects that a mill rescue may be "too far gone" for a fast paced family, they try to place them in experienced homes; quiet homes; or homes with other dogs. These are by far the hardest ones for rescuers' hearts to accept, but they are also a constant reminder of why they do what they do.

The Educator

Finding forever homes for mill rescues is just part of the big picture. Through interaction with these survivors, we are constantly reminded of the horrors of puppy mills and the commercialization/farming of dogs when we see the neglect and abuse these dogs have suffered. We must work not only to rescue and adopt dogs, but to educate their new owners about the truth behind that puppy in the pet store window.

Keeping a journal or blog on the reform of your puppy mill dog is a great way to educate the public -- through the eyes of the survivor. Together we have made a difference in the life of just one dog, but together we can also make a difference in the lives of hundreds of thousands of dogs still caged in puppy mills. It is only when the public realizes the connection between pet stores and puppy mills that we will end the demand; end the supply; end the abuse!

Below is Georgia, a deaf and blind Dachshund -- she has no eyes. Both the deafness and blindness are a result of negligent breeding and were totally preventable. She spent the first 2 years of her life in puppy mills, but has spent the last 9 years in the home of Kim Townsend (co-author of this article). She has attended "Humane Day" at the Missouri Capitol and other events to help educate the public about the commercial dog industry. Due to her age, Georgia is



now retired from "public speaking" and her favorite thing in life is to seek out the warm rays of sunshine, and the smells floating on a gentle breeze.

