



Building Adaptive skills in Fearful Dogs by Giving Powerful Options & Freedom to Make Choices

The video featured on the online version of this article is of an Austin Pets Alive! Shelter dog named Café currently living with a foster couple who hope to adopt him. Without going too much into it, Café has pretty serious fear issues, particularly of people.

I felt that one could easily make the mistake of trying to (over) control every interaction and environment and pressure Café into choosing between limited sets of response options in order to get some kind of reward. This is often set up as a pressure-filled situation for a dog, such as "I can stay safe and not get a treat. Or I can get closer to this person and get a treat but he might eat me. Should I risk it?"

Rather than put these pressure-filled options to Café, I wanted to give him a wide range of response options to choose from and put as *little* pressure as possible on him to make his choices. And rather than the positive response options *leading* to reward I wanted the responses *themselves* to function as their own rewards. I wanted him to make choices that were intrinsically fun in and of themselves, rather than make unpleasant choices that would later lead to rewards.

Café struck me as a dog that needed to learn *how to be a dog*. He needed to learn about running and playing and sniffing and frolicking and leaping and splashing and chasing. My belief was that once he learned how good the world could be through making fun choices on his own, the trickle down effect would be substantial and he could learn to function in ways that were mutually exclusive to fear.

Walnut Creek Metropolitan Park is a massive off-leash park in North Austin with miles of hiking trails and water holes. It's like Disney World (or maybe Las Vegas, depending on your demographic) for dogs with a cornucopia of exciting sights, smells, and dog friendly stimuli. At the right times of day, you run into a few dogs and people without it being too overwhelming. I know Walnut Creek Park very well. I take my dogs there 3-4x a week. While I can't know everything that might happen in any given situation, I can do a pretty good job predicting the environment at Walnut Creek Park. This is very important.

So we take Café to Walnut Creek Park. Rather than go all gung-ho off-leash immediately, as a safety measure we put him on a 30-foot long leash once inside the park. I give him as much leash as he needs and keep it as loose as I can. I want him to feel completely free and feel no pressure from me to do anything in particular. I know he likes dogs, especially smaller ones, so I bring my poodle-mix Alan with us. Café is at first reluctant, tail tucked, following us cautiously down the trail, unwilling to engage with the environment. We just keep moving and he keeps following. Soon his tail starts to come up from between his legs just a little bit. He starts sniffing here and there. We just let him go to town. Whichever way he wants to go, we go. If he wants to sniff, we let him. We let him take it all in on his own terms. Soon he is

scampering about and flash-forward to yesterday's park visit, and you can see Café experiencing just how fun this world can be.

We still have a lot of work to do. But as of now, we've started seeing him willingly (albeit cautiously) go up to strangers, and has even offered a playbow to one woman. He gave me a playbow for the first time yesterday. We're going to continue getting him to the park regularly, in addition to other exercises that will allow him make his own choices on smaller scales.

Please don't try anything suggested here on your own unless you are 100% certain no one will get hurt.