



## RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

# Fear of New People

### Why is my puppy or dog scared of meeting new people?

There are many reasons why dogs or puppies may be fearful of new people, and these reasons can all interact with each other:

- Genetics (including breed tendencies) Some breeds of dog are naturally wary of strangers and were originally bred to work independently of people (e.g. types of flock guardian dogs like Maremma sheepdogs).
- Lack of socialisation. There is a critical window of learning in a puppy's age where they learn about different people and environments etc. If a puppy is not exposed to new people or different types of people during this time, they can develop a fear of people as they get older.
- Abuse and traumatic experiences.
- Learned or associative fears (beards/moustaches, hats, deep loud voices, helmets for example). A puppy or dog may have been scared by something when they were young, or perhaps they have never seen a person with facial hair or a hat and can often be worried by things like this.
- Pain or illness

### Dogs do what works for them

Generally fearful dogs start off by trying to stay away from the things that scare them. But as they are confronted with scary situations repeatedly, they can learn that offense (barking, snapping and biting) is their best defence because it makes the scary people go away (Yin 2012).



### What can I do to make my dog more comfortable about meeting new people?

- Don't make them! This is very important. How would you feel if someone pushed you into a room full of spiders or snakes? (Go on, they won't hurt you!) You wouldn't like that person very much and you certainly would not like spiders or snakes any time soon!
- Dogs fearful of people must be worked with in their own time to gain trust and build confidence.
- Be your dog's advocate. If they don't like meeting new people, ask people not to try and pat them.
- Pair new people with something nice! Dogs learn by association, so pairing new people with roast chicken for example can help dogs to associate new people with something nice.



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### Learn to read your dog's body language

- Dogs express fear through body language and vocalisations.
- Learning to read your dog's body language and the more subtle signs dogs show when they are stressed or uncomfortable is very important. For more info refer to our 'canine body language' info sheet.
- If you can identify your dog's first observable signs of fear, you can help to make your dog more comfortable. As a person meeting a fearful dog, it can help to use the subtle signs yourself to help the dog feel more comfortable (e.g. turning your head away).
- Some common signals are: vocalisations (e.g. whimpering, growling), tense muscles, increased salivation, yawning, shedding of hair, shallow breathing, ears back, lip licking to name just a few.

### What can 'new people' do to make it easier for my dog to meet them?

- Don't try and pat or interact with a fearful dog.
- Make yourself nonthreatening, don't stare at the dog, turn on your side, have a relaxed body posture and you can even crouch down to make yourself smaller.
- Be aware of something you may be wearing which could be worrying to a dog (e.g. a hat, sunglasses, fluorescent vest or jacket) and remove it.
- Turn your head away and talk in a soothing voice.
- If the dog comes up to investigate you, it is important that you don't try and pat it.
- Coming up for a sniff is not an invitation to touch them. Just allow the dog to approach and retreat as it likes.
- Ensure you ask the owner to call the dog away before you stand up or make any sudden movements as this may frighten the dog if it is close to you.
- Feed the dog yummy treats, or if it won't take treats from you, gently toss them in their direction.

### Meeting 'New people' in the home

- Control the 'new people' numbers. If your dog is scared of new people, don't introduce your dog to a large group at the one time.
  - Have your dog away in a safe zone or crate when people arrive
  - Once people are settled and seated, allow your dog to come into the room on lead
  - Ask people to ignore your dog (no looking at, speaking to or touching)
  - You can feed your dog yummy treats, and your visitors can also toss treats onto the ground near the dog
  - Allow your dog to approach and sniff, then retreat (ask people not to pat at this stage)
  - Keep creating positive associations while the visitors are there.
  - You may need to take your dog out of the room and back to their safe zone when people need to get up or move around
  - Don't reprimand your dog if they bark or growl at people; simply go back to the first step.
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### **Complementary therapies**

These are most effective when used in conjunction with a behaviour change program. Always check with your veterinarian before using any medications (herbal or otherwise).

You can try flower essences (e.g. rescue remedy), massage, TTouch, thundershirts, anxiety wraps, body wraps, Dog Appeasing Pheromone (DAP), homeopathy and herbs to name some.

### **Crates are great!**

It is important that your dog has a safe place to retreat to in the home or if you go to friends house. Crates can be excellent for this as they are portable and provide a safe haven. Refer to our “benefits of a crate trained dog” and “crating for management” to set up these areas for success.

Finally, it may take a lot of time and training to improve your dog’s behaviour around new people. Be prepared to put in the work as seeing an improvement is a wonderful reward.

### **References and further reading**

Wilde, Nicole (2006) Help for your fearful dog, A Step by Step Guide to Helping Your Dog Conquer His Fears Phantom publishing

Yin, Dr Sophia (2012) Help, My Dog Bites! How To Deal With Dogs Who Bite Dr Yin’s Animal Behaviour and Medicine blog

<http://drsophiayin.com/blog/entry/help-my-dog-bites-how-to-deal-with-dogs-who-bite>

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