



RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

Timid Dogs and Fear Aggression



Dogs that are fearful of people or other dogs want to increase the distance between them and the scary person or dog. They tend to stand at a distance and bark as if to say “Stay away, don’t come closer because you’re scary”!

Nicole Wilde, a well-known animal behaviourist and certified pet dog trainer, says that many fearful dogs never act in an aggressive manner unless they are forced to defend themselves.

If you have a timid dog we recommend:

1. Seek a consultation with a suitably qualified Animal Behaviour specialist who can tailor a rehabilitation program for your dog. If the condition is left untreated then it can get worse with time. This would be detrimental to your dog and to those in contact with them. Your vet can arrange referral.
2. Initially limit the exposure of your dog to any situations that they find distressing. For example, keep trips to a minimum, and limit the number of visitors to the house. In time this can be increased as your dog gains in confidence.
3. Do not force your dog to interact. Wait for your dog to approach people, and reward them for doing so. One way to encourage this behaviour is to use treats. Throw a food treat close to your dog. Once your dog eats it, you can slowly throw the treats a little closer to the person, encouraging your dog to move closer. This must be done slowly. Avoid too much direct eye contact that may be frightening. Do not follow the dog if they retreat. Allow the dog a safe haven to withdraw to when scared.
4. Teach your dog what calm behaviour is and reward him with high value treats and verbal praise, when they responds in a relaxed and positive way. Teach them an alternative, appropriate behaviour to the fear response in calm situations then start to desensitize him by introducing low level fear evoking things at a distance.
5. Your dog needs to be handled gently and quietly to build up their confidence.
6. The possibility of a fear bite will always be present. Anyone interacting with the dog should be aware of this. They should act appropriately around the dog, given that we know that lots of normal situations are very frightening for them. This dog cannot be treated in the usual way, but needs to be treated with respect for its particular circumstance.



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7. A rehabilitation program needs to be designed for each individual dog. Our Animal Training and Behaviour Centre can tailor a program which allows you to help your dog to work on developing appropriate responses to fear evoking situations.

References and Further Reading

Wilde, Nicole (2006) Help For Your Fearful Dog, Phantom Publishing CA

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