



RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

Training dogs to overcome their fears

Some dogs can be shy or fearful when they are put into a situation they are unfamiliar with, have never learnt how to cope in, or have had a bad experience in previously. For example: when meeting new people, when in a new environment, when in a scary environment such as at the vet, when being brushed or handled, or when seeing an object such as an umbrella or raincoat that they are unfamiliar with.

Fearful dogs will display a whole range of behaviours that let us know they are not comfortable with a situation, or that they can't handle it at all. These behaviours range from very subtle lip licking, to lunging or snapping.

Some very fearful dogs may show aggression when they are confronted with a situation they cannot handle. It is particularly important for owners of these dogs to be able to respond to the initial, very subtle signs their dog may give.

Body language

Subtle behaviours that indicate a dog is not comfortable include:

- Lip licking
- Turning their eyes away
- Their eyes darting around, unable to focus on one thing
- Turning their head away
- Turning away completely
- Yawning
- Stiffening of their body (freezing)
- Moving around a lot and unable to settle
- Retreating under furniture or behind their owners

If your dog is showing any of these signs, you need to be aware that they are not comfortable and make sure the situation does not escalate (the threat, e.g. a person, does not come closer) and take them out of the situation out shortly after. Make sure you are relaxed and calm. If you find the situation stressful, leave straight away. If you get stressed, your dog will think there is a reason to be stressed so it will exacerbate the situation.

More overt behaviours that indicate the dog really can't handle a situation include:

- Barking (Often fearful dogs will run forward, bark and then dart back again, possibly retreating behind the owner.)
- Running / lunging at a person and then retreating immediately.
- Running under furniture and hiding.



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- Growling - normally if the threat has become closer
- Showing their teeth - once again, normally if the threat is even closer
- Snapping at the threat
- Biting



If your dog is showing any of these signs, your dog is not coping at all. You must take your dog out of the situation immediately and to an area that they feel safe. Your dog is not able to learn when they are this fearful so there is no benefit to keeping them there, they will not be desensitised. However, make sure you remain calm, as your dog will pick up on your stress, and think if you are stressed, there is definitely a reason to be.

Training your dogs to overcome their fears

There are two main parts to teaching your dog how to overcome their fear of a specific situation. You will need to work on each of their fears individually, however when they start to overcome one of their fears, they will often learn more quickly to overcome other fears.

Firstly, it is necessary to 'desensitise' them to what they are scared of. This can be done by exposing them to it at levels that they are mildly uncomfortable with, but can cope with, and likewise for a length of time that they can cope with. As they become more comfortable in the situation, you can gradually increase the intensity of the exposure (i.e., closer, for longer). It is important that you do this process very gradually so they have lots of experience coping with situation so are more likely to cope again next time. If they get to the point that they can no longer cope, you need to remove them from the situation straight away as they cannot learn anything anymore. 'Flooding' will potentially increase their fear, and definitely make it harder to train them out of it.

While doing this, it is also important to replace their negative association with what they are scared of, with a positive association, such as with a very tasty treat (cheese, chicken, ham etc) or a toy that they really like to play with. To do this, every time that they see or hear what scares them, we need to give them a treat or play with them. The aim of this is that they will make the connection that seeing or hearing what scares them means they will get something good, so by extension, they will think seeing or hearing it, is actually a good thing.

If they do not want to take a treat, or play, this is an indication that they are too uncomfortable to learn, so you will need to reduce the level of exposure, as discussed below. You may also want to check you are using the highest value treat or toy possible.

So the two parts of training are: desensitising and overcoming the negative association.



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Controlling your dog's exposure to what they find scary

When working on desensitising your dog it is very important to make sure you don't expose your dog to the source of their fear at a level they can't handle. Likewise it is also important that you do exposure them at levels they can handle so they can learn to cope and improve. As such, you will need to think of the different levels a scary situation can be presented to your dog at. When determining what level they can handle there are three factors to consider:

Distance and space - you need to consider how close your dog is to what they find scary, and how much space they have. The greater the distance and the more spacious the area, the more likely your dog will be able to cope. For example, if they are 50m away from a dog, or the raincoat is on the other side of the room, they may be able to cope with the situation. Likewise, if they are in an open park with a dog, they may be able to cope better than in a room.

The level of the threat - another key factor is how threatening the situation is. For example, a person sitting on the ground looking in the other direction is much less threatening than a person running directly towards your dog so they would be able to cope better.

Duration of exposure - you also need to consider how long your dog is exposed to the scary situation. While they may be able to cope for short periods of time (eg from 5 secs) but find it to hard if they are exposed to it for a long time.

Remember, the aim is to expose them at a level and for a time they can cope with while replacing their negative association with something really good.

To determine what level of exposure your dog can cope with, it is important that you can read their body language, as mentioned in the first section of this handout. This will give you the ability to know what they are feeling, so you can address the situation before they are too overwhelmed and can no longer cope.

Shut Down

If your dog has shown the above behaviour and suddenly becomes very 'calm' and does not seem to be responding anymore. It does not mean that they are suddenly able to cope, it is most likely that they have progressed to 'shut down'. Shut down is a state where the dogs can no longer cope at all so stop responding to their surroundings. It is very important at this point, that you remove your dog from the situation they are in, as this is a very negative experience and it will make desensitising them to that situation very difficult in the future.

Winding down from a scary experience

When your dog has a very scary experience they have a huge rush of adrenaline and it can take them quite a while to recover and return to normal adrenaline levels. In fact if it was a really bad experience (eg a fight or nearly a fight with another dog) it can take up to six days! It is



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important to remember this, as until your dog's adrenaline returns to normal they will still be on edge, so more likely to react to another scary experience, and to react more extremely.

As such, after an incident which causes your dog to display any of the overt behaviours described above, you will need to give them at least a day to recover, before exposing them to anything else they find scary. If it was a more major incident, you will need to allow more time. If you are unsure how much time your dog needs, allow more time.

The key points you need to remember are:

- There are two parts to teaching your dog to overcome their fears:
 - Desensitising them to what scares them at levels they can cope with
 - Replacing their current negative association with a really good one
- To determine what levels you should expose them at consider:
 - Distance - how far away they are
 - Duration - how long you ask them to be there for
 - Level of threat - how threatening the situation is for them
- It is important to be very aware of your dog's body language and act accordingly
- If they are showing subtle signs of being uncomfortable
 - Make sure the situation doesn't escalate, make sure they are getting really good treats or a game, and take them out of the situation shortly after
 - Make sure you are calm, if you find the situation stressful, leave straight away as you don't want your dog associating the situation with you being stressed.
- If they are showing overt signs that they can no longer handle the situation
 - Take them out of the situation as quickly, and as calmly as possible.
 - Take them to an area they find safer and don't expose them again for some time.

A note on fear aggression

If your dog is aggressive when it is afraid, you will need to follow all the advice on this sheet, but you will need to be particularly careful that you never place your dog in a situation where they may feel they need to resort to aggression to make what is scaring them go away. Dogs normally show 'fear aggression' when they are put in a situation that engages their 'fight or flight' mode, and if they don't have a flight option (eg if they are in a confined space or on lead), or they are scared of being chased, they may choose the fight option. At home, if your dog tries to flee or hide, allow them to do so if it is safe. It is particularly important not to pursue or 'corner' a frightened dog. Out of the home environment, calmly take your dog out of the situation.

We also highly recommend that you consult a vet behaviourist to work in conjunction with a training plan.

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