

Training Handout | Fearful Dogs

Whether you have a new furry addition to your family, or a pet that has been with you for some time, it is important to be able to recognize signals that your dog is fearful of someone or something. If your dog is new to you, you may still be learning to read the signals and understand what is causing your dog's fear. If your newly adopted dog is showing fearful behavior, it's important to remember that sometimes, fearful behavior will manifest in a shelter environment but may not surface in a stable home environment and other times, behavior seen in the shelter may carry over to the home.

Defining Fearful Behavior

Dogs display fearful behavior for a number of reasons. Some dogs are predisposed to having a fearful personality due to genetics. Others may be fearful due to improper, or lack of, early socialization. Some dogs may have fearful behavior due to a prior traumatic experience. In many cases, a combination of these factors can result in a dog who displays fearful behavior. A dog may demonstrate fearful behavior in response to certain situations or people, i.e., the behavior can be context specific, or a dog may demonstrate fearful behavior in all situations, i.e., it may be more generalized.

Signals that a Dog May Display Out of Fear

- Avoidance (moving away from the person, object, or situation)
- Averting eye contact
- Tail tucked underneath belly
- Slow movement or 'freezing'
- Displacement behaviors such as lip-licking or yawning
- Dilated pupils
- Trembling
- Flattening his body to the ground
- Panting or pacing
- Refusal to accept food/treat

General Tips

- Give your dog some space. Do not force a fearful dog to interact; instead, let the dog make the choice to interact when he feels comfortable.
- Do not allow family members, guests, or strangers to rush up to or pressure your dog to interact; many fearful dogs do best if they are politely ignored.
- Try to keep your movements slow and predictable.
- Use a soft, pleasing tone of voice and gentle, non-threatening body language when interacting with a dog who is displaying fearful behavior. Stand sideways instead of 'head-on' and avoid direct eye contact. If possible, turn sideways and kneel down while turning your eyes slightly away from the dog.
- Do not engage in body language that may be perceived as threatening such as direct eye contact, reaching into the dog's space, putting hands over the dog's head or neck, looming or standing over the dog.
- Always keep your dog on leash when outdoors. A martingale-style collar can be beneficial as a dog can slip out of it if he gets startled or spooked by a noise or something in the environment.
- Even if you have a fenced yard, it may be helpful to take the dog out on a leash or long line in the yard so you can gently guide the dog to and from your home.



Prevention

The single most important way to help prevent your dog from displaying fearful behavior is to commit to early and continued positive socialization. If you have a new puppy, take your puppy out and make every experience positive – a puppy kindergarten class is the best place to get started on the right foot. Remember, whether the experience is positive or not is determined by how your dog feels, not by what we think of the interaction! If you have just adopted an adult dog, get to know your dog and build a relationship with him in a basic obedience class. Allow your dog time to acclimate to your home and pay attention to what his body language is saying. If your dog is afraid of something, do not force an interaction; that can make the fear worse.

DOGGIE LANGUAGE

starring Boogie the Boston Terrier

