

MONTGOMERY COUNTY ANIMAL SHELTER

PET BEHAVIOR AND TRAINING SERVICES, INC.

THE SHY OR FEARFUL DOG

Written by Pet Behavior and Training Services, Inc. for use by Montgomery County Animal Shelter

Encourage Confidence

It is critical in dealing with the shy or fearful dog not to unintentionally reward him for being shy. It is natural to want to reassure him, however, he will think your soft stroking and gentle words are your approval for his fear behavior. "It's OK, don't be afraid" sounds like praise to the dog. Better to give him a happy pat and encourage him with "Come on, you can do it". Do not coddle him or let him hide behind you. Work to get a happy, tail wagging response in place of shy behavior

Socializing

The most important tools you have in dealing with a shy or fearful dog are the "SIT" command, wonderful food rewards, and your happy praise.

Take advantage of every opportunity to have a stranger feed your dog. Carry treats with you whenever you and the dog are out, hand them to people. You want your dog to think everyone he meets is a source of treats. This will help change your dog's perception of "stranger = fear" to "stranger = positive experience". The positive experience is most easily conveyed to your dog in the form of very attractive food rewards (small pieces of chicken or cheese) and YOUR happy praise for staying calm and relaxed.

Start working at whatever level your dog is comfortable. Your goal should be to have your dog approach people to get a treat. If he is too afraid to approach a person to take food from their hand, start by having the person sit on the floor and toss the treat to your dog. Gradually decrease the distance the treat is thrown until he is taking it from the person's hand. Don't forget to praise him whenever he acts in a friendly, confident manner.

Many times a training class can be a confidence-building experience. In class, your dog will get to meet and see the same people and dogs each week, this helps him to gradually become less frightened. Being told what to do and how to behave also helps him learn how to cope.

Caution

Be careful not to force your dog into any situation that is too stressful for him to handle. While he needs to face his fears, there is a point at which you can stress him too much. If he refuses to eat his treats (and you know that they are great, and he is hungry), that is a sign that he is overly stressed.

Some shy/fearful dogs progress slowly. You will need to be very patient when teaching him that nothing is wrong

If your dog is extremely shy or fearful it would be best to work with a professional familiar with counter-conditioning and desensitization techniques. Contact your veterinarian for referrals if you live outside the area, or you may call us for an individual appointment.

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A non-profit organization specializing in the behavior of pets

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