



Confidence Building Exercises for Shy or Fearful Dogs

While some dogs seem to be oblivious to their changing surroundings or the coming and going of people or other dogs, others are more nervous in nature and will greatly benefit from some confidence building. If you are struggling with your dog exhibiting timid or fearful behavior, we have some helpful exercises that are designed to boost your dog's confidence.

If your dog is displaying growling or snapping in these situations it is time to call in a professional trainer with experience in fear aggression.

Exercises:

- **Walk, Walk, Walk! Walking is often underrated for building confidence.** Walking is a bonding time for you and your dog, there are things to smell and see which can distract your dog away from any nervous feelings. Start simple if your dog is very fearful and follow the same route until they are walking with no issue, then change up the route a bit. Tossing some yummy treats randomly on your path can also help to create a more positive experience. **Always be sure that your dog is securely harnessed when walking so if they get spooked they are not able to get away.**
- **Teach your dog to "Touch."** By touching your hand with their nose, you can encourage your dog to look away from a stimulus that is scary to them and be rewarded. To teach your dog "touch" you simply offer an open palm, say "touch", and when they come in to have a sniff and touch your hand with their nose, you will offer them a treat from the OPPOSITE hand. You practice this in an area without a lot of distractions until they are readily touching your hand when asked. Then you can start using this command in areas of distraction and eventually areas where your dog may feel anxious or fearful. When you notice your dog focusing on a stimulus that induces hesitation or fear, simply ask them to "touch" to get their eyes off the stimulus and their focus back to you and something that is rewarding to them. You can also use "touch" to encourage your dog to try things that are scary to them such as going up stairs or getting in the car. You may not get them to complete the task in one session, but going in small steps and keeping things positive will help them learn that trying new things is rewarding.
- **If your dog likes other dogs, arrange some play dates with other well-adjusted dogs.** Interacting with other dogs who are confident and well-mannered can really help your dog mimic those behaviors. Dog play is also a great way to burn off some cortisol (the stress hormone) that has built up in your fearful dog. **Dog parks can be very overwhelming for a timid or fearful dog, and you don't have control over how people or other dogs are interacting with your dog.**
- **Basic obedience training is always a great idea for any dog, including one that is timid.** Be sure you are always using positive reinforcement training. Once your dog has learned some new commands, you can use them during walks, or in atmospheres where your dog may struggle. Keeping their mind busy in times like this will keep their focus on you and not the environment.

- Brain games or puzzle feeders are an easy way to help your dog build problem solving skills. Playing tug with your dog and letting them “win” is also a confidence booster. Keep games short and always positive. Fetch is good for dogs that are clingy and fearful. They learn to move away from you and that you will be there when they return. You can also toss treats a few feet away for dogs that are not toy motivated.

Patience is the key to working with shy and/or fearful dogs. We tend to want to flood our dogs with experiences which is overwhelming for a shy dog and may cause them to regress even further. Go slow with training and celebrate small steps. Remember that every dog is an individual and their comfort level will vary with various stimuli.

The myth that being warm and comforting to your furry friend in times of fear or anxiousness will only reinforce his behavior should be left as just that, A MYTH. Love and care for your dog in their moments of discomfort.

If, after trying these suggestions, you are still experiencing undesirable behaviors in your dog, SUBMIT QUESTIONS by clicking the link under Ask A Trainer on the Behavior and Training page of the Wayside Waifs website: www.waysidewaifs.org.

Written by the Wayside Waifs Canine Behavior Team
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