

Understanding Fear in Dogs

Fear is a common emotional response in dogs, especially when in a stressful or new situation or environment. They might be fearful of strangers or all people, other animals, sudden movements and noises, or anything unfamiliar. It takes time for these dogs to get adjusted and takes lots of patience. Once they bond with you, they will become affectionate and loving. Some dogs adjust to the new environment and are not as fearful after a few days or weeks, while others may never be confident in all settings and might be nervous of new things or people forever.

This guide will help you bond with your new dog and have a successful transition once you get home!

Set up the environment for success

- Use crates or a secluded room to give them a safe space to go and be unbothered. Crates especially are helpful for them to have as their own little bedroom. Use a blanket to cover half of the crate, giving the dog a place to feel hidden.
- Use a physical fence and check the entire perimeter for holes, broken parts, or weak spots where the dog can get out easily. Electric fences do not prevent a fearful dog from escaping, they will just run right through. Use heavy or sturdy tie out that can't be chewed through or broken easily. Always supervise when outside.
- Use a double barrier when leaving the house.
 - Example: leave through the garage – if dog runs past you out the door, they are in the enclosed garage, and you can get them back inside before opening the garage.
- Make sure collars fit well: two fingers should be able to fit under the collar, but the collar should not be able to be pulled off their head. Many dogs get spooked on walks and then back up quickly and can back out of the collar.
- Use well fitted body harnesses for walks if you can. Use heavy nylon leashes, not retractable leashes, those can break easily and give you no control over the dog.

*RISK OF ESCAPE – Fearful dogs are more likely to try to escape in a fear induced panic and they are harder to get back if they do escape.

Interacting and building trust

- Fearful dogs need to go at their own pace to get to know you and explore their environment. Give them the choice to come to you, or not if they don't want to. The dog decides what is scary, not you.
- Don't push the dog to go at your pace. Pushing them to go too quickly will make them feel less safe and comfortable and will ultimately lead to more fear and will make the process of building trust take longer. Remember, a fearful dog can bite or become aggressive when they feel threatened or if you push their boundaries.
- Avoid experiences where there is 'too much' going on. These experiences will be overwhelming and increase their fear.
 - Parties, sporting events, dog parks, family and friend gatherings
- Make sure they have positive experiences.

- Use lots of treats and food. Soft, smelly, meat treats are often popular, but experiment with different kinds until you find one that your dog loves!
- Use verbal praise and encouragement in soft, soothing voice. Don't do sudden movements or loud noises.
- Spend quiet time with the dog. Sit in the room reading or ignoring the dog while they are allowed to explore and sniff or approach.
- Follow the 'Touch to Ask' Rule. If you aren't sure they are enjoying your petting, give them a brief touch, only a few seconds, then pull your hand away. If they try to interact with you after, then you'll know they want you to pet them.
- Keep your interactions brief. Give them plenty of breaks and alone time (Or quiet time without you asking for pets).
- Ask anyone who meets the dog to follow these same rules and show them how to interact with your dog appropriately. Give them treats to offer, and ask them not to reach for the dog.
- Watch your dog for signs of fear, discomfort, or aggression during the interaction and end the interaction if needed.

Once they are comfortable with your family, then slowly introduce the dogs to more experiences. It is best to contact an animal behaviorist or positive reinforcement trainer with knowledge of scientifically based techniques to assist you with training. If you need help on finding a local behaviorist or trainer, call us at 937-898-4457.

What NOT to do with your fearful dog:

- Do not punish the dog for showing ANY of the behaviors indicating fear or aggression. This will make the fear worse, potentially lead to more aggression or biting, and will ruin the trust you are building with the dog.
- Don't force a dog to experience any situation that is causing fear. They will not "just get over it" by being exposed without proper desensitization training.
- Go too quickly. Fear takes time to overcome.
- Give up! It takes patience, but they will get there. When you finally win their trust, it is so rewarding. The first time they look to you for reassurance and then bravely overcome a fear is the best feeling out there.♡

Signs of fear

Dogs communicate with their whole body. Some signs are subtle, and others are easier to see. Here is a list of many of the signals and what they look like to help you understand when your dog is telling you they are scared. Please also reference the picture examples.

A little Scared: Proceed with Caution. Slow down if you can

- Ears are backwards or close to their head
- Lowering their head
- Licking their lips
- Raising their front paw
- Yawning
- Tail is tucked or close to their body
- Looking away from you
- Eyes look big or wide
- Panting

Scared: Stop what you are doing and help the dog feel more comfortable

- Their body and muscles look tense or tight
- They look like they are about to run
- Watching you out of the corner of their eyes
- Hair on their back (Hackles) are standing up
- The dog freezes and stops moving
- Turning their head away from you
- Backing or walking away from you
- Shaking
- Cowering or crouched body

Very Scared: You have pushed the dog too far. Stop interacting immediately and give the dog space

- Wrinkling their lips
- Showing teeth
- Staring directly and intensely at you
- Tail is stiff, might be parallel with the floor
- Growling