

Helping the Shy or Fearful Dog

Fearful dogs avoid people or things that frighten them, may seem depressed or disinterested and sometimes lunge or do a barking display to make what they're afraid of go further away. If you've decided to share your life with a shy dog, take heart. The following information can help you understand what he is feeling and give you ways to help him get better.

Different Kinds of Shyness

The most common kinds of shyness in dogs are:

- Social shyness, where the dog is fearful of unfamiliar people or certain kinds of people. Dogs like this are sometimes described as “taking a while to warm up,” “one man dogs” or “protective.” They are usually fine with a certain person once they get to know them. Examples are dogs who are afraid of men or big men or men with beards, dogs who are uncomfortable around children, and dogs who bark at the sight of people with unusual gaits. Dogs can also be shy with other dogs.
- Context fears, where the dog is afraid of certain kinds of situations. Examples are dogs who are afraid of going to the vet, panic during car rides or are uncomfortable in new places.
- Sound sensitivities, where the dog is afraid of sudden loud noises. These dogs flatten and try to escape when a car backfires, or pace and salivate during thunderstorms or fireworks.

Why Is He Like This?

Fear is very common in all animals. Although it's possible that a fearful dog has suffered abuse or a bad experience, most of the time fears result from a combination of a genetic predisposition and some lack of experience, especially in the first months of life. For instance, a dog may have missed out on becoming socialized to certain kinds of people by simply not being around them enough when he was a puppy.

Will He Get Better?

Most fearful dogs can be helped to gradually improve. This is a long, slow process in most cases and requires patience. Shy dogs are not for everybody. They need caretakers who have compassion and perseverance.

What Can I Do?

The best thing for a fearful dog is to expose him to what frightens him but at a **milder intensity** and combined with a **fun or positive association**. So, a dog who is afraid of children might start to feel more comfortable if he regularly sees children but at a distance where he doesn't feel too worried. Then, if his guardian praises, pats him and gives him treats after the dog has noticed the kids, the dog might start to see the kids as good news: “Wow, great things happen to me when kids are around!” A dog who is afraid of traffic would benefit from audiotapes of traffic sounds, time spent near quieter

streets, all combined with games, treats and happy talk from his guardian. As the dog improves, time can be spent on busier and busier streets. Dogs learn strongly from association.

How Can I Help My Shy Dog Settle into His New Home?

The best possible strategy is to let the dog go at his own pace. Any kind of pressure or coercion to make contact usually makes things worse. Let the dog hide if he needs to, investigate things and come to you when he feels ready. Avoid as many negative experiences as possible early on. With time, your shy dog will bond to you and get used to his new surroundings.

Courtesy of The San Francisco SPCA Behavior and Training Department