

Bringing Home a Fearful Dog

Dogs are individuals with unique experiences and behaviors. Just like us, one dog may react differently than another dog to a novel experience. When bringing home a dog who shows fearful behaviors, you need to learn your dog's body language and what causes them to become fearful. Dogs can be fearful of almost anything, including but not limited to people, noises, sights, smells, movement, or environments. There are several common reasons why a dog is fearful, though we rarely know what caused that fear in the first place. Even if we don't know the cause of the fear, we are still able to modify the behavior and help our dogs feel more comfortable.



Most commonly, a dog's fear stems from a lack of exposure, a scary experience in the past, or a genetic predisposition. A dog who has had limited experiences in their life are likely to be fearful when encountering something new, such as traffic or visitors. Likewise, a dog who had a negative experience with a particular human or object, may be fearful of similar people or items in the future. Genetics also play a role in fearful behaviors in dogs. Just like people, dogs can be genetically predisposed to fearful behaviors or other challenges. Some dogs will remain cautious and uncomfortable with triggers throughout their lives, while others will show more confidence and adapt to a new home life with support from their family. It is important to be prepared for both situations when working with a dog who shows fearful behaviors.

With this in mind, there are several ways to set your dog up for success and help them feel comfortable when coming into your home.

Setting your dog up in a safe space and allowing decompression time:

Set your dog up in a single room that is low-traffic and quiet. Provide the dog with food, water, toys, and a crate with a bed. The door to the room should be closed, or the doorway blocked by a baby gate. Have this room ready for your new dog prior to their arrival for an easy transition. If your dog is so fearful that they are not comfortable with going outside on a leash for potty breaks or you are unable to touch the dog, place potty pads in their room. This allows your dog to eliminate without the stress of being handled or clipped to a leash when they are uncomfortable. Allow your dog time to become comfortable in this single room before introducing them to the rest of the home.

Every dog needs a period of time to decompress and get back to baseline relaxation when in a new home. The amount of time required can vary with each dog. At a minimum, expect it to take a full week.

During this time, it is important to provide your dog with a quiet environment and limit the amount of new people and experiences they have. Do not invite visitors over to meet the dog, have a large



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gathering, or take your dog on outings to novel locations such as pet stores or dog parks.

Slow and appropriate interactions with members of the household:

Giving dogs choices, especially fearful dogs, creates a more confident dog and decreases stress over time. When a dog knows they have a choice and the ability to move away from what is making them uncomfortable, it gives them more power in the situation and reduces their stress level. This means the dog should always be given the choice to interact with someone or something. Finding something your dog finds reinforcing will be very helpful moving forward. Food is a common reinforcer for dogs and is easiest to work with. You may have to experiment with several different treats to find what your dog likes. Many dogs like hot dogs, chicken, or cheese, though all should be distributed in tiny pieces and in moderation.

When beginning to interact with your dog, start by walking past the room and tossing a small handful of treats (cut small to roughly the size of a pea) over the baby gate blocking the doorway. You can also sit in the room with your dog tossing treats in their general direction. Remain on the opposite side of the room from your dog, always allowing them space to move away. Do not try to coax your dog over to take treats from your hand. Sometimes, a dog will choose to approach for a high value treat because the food item is highly reinforcing. When approaching you for the treat, the dog might realize how close they are to the “scary” person and then feel trapped or over their fear threshold. This may cause them to escalate to a growl or bite. To avoid this situation, continue tossing treats away from you, allowing the dog to approach you once they *choose* to, instead of just for treats. When they begin to approach you, continue to toss treats away to reinforce them and allow the dog to choose to approach again. Once your dog is approaching you readily and soliciting attention, you can offer petting *under the chin* or on the chest. Avoid any fast movements or reaching over their head, as those can both come across as threatening. Follow the 3-second rule with petting. If the dog solicits petting, pet them for 3 seconds, then pause and wait for the dog to re-initiate the petting (this may look like them pawing at you, nudging your hand, or leaning closer to you). If they do, pet them again for 3 seconds and repeat. This allows the dog to continue to have a choice during the interaction. It may take days or even weeks for your dog to choose to approach and solicit attention. It is important to go slowly and not rush the process. Going too slowly will not cause harm, however *rushing* the process could cause your dog more stress and fear. If at any point your dog is showing forward-moving aggression, stop what you are doing and contact a professional for help.

Remember that once your dog is comfortable with you and your family, they are likely to still be fearful of new people. They are also likely to show fearful behaviors in new situations, even if they are comfortable in your home. It will be important for you to be your dog's advocate by setting up their environments for positive and safe interactions. Set clear guidelines with visitors on acceptable behaviors around your dog prior to visits. If your dog is uncomfortable, do not allow people to approach, pet, or attempt to interact. You can remove your dog from the environment and place them in a separate space with a high value enrichment item to avoid unwanted interactions.



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Introducing your dog to new people, objects, and environments

When you begin to introduce your dog to new people, novel objects, or environments, there are several techniques you can use. Two recommended methods are called "Counter Conditioning and Desensitization" and "Treat and Retreat." Follow the links below for more details on these two methods.

CC&D - <https://www.whole-dog-journal.com/behavior/reducing-your-dogs-anxieties/>

Treat and Retreat - <https://blog.betternaturedogtraining.com/2013/04/15/houseguests/>

It is important to continue supporting your dog and working with their fearful behaviors so it does not escalate. Modifying fearful behaviors can be difficult and it is helpful to work with a professional one-on-one who can support you and your dog through the process. When working with a professional, ensure they are a positive reinforcement trainer prior to beginning the behavior modification process. Contact the Wisconsin Humane Society behavior department at asktheexpert@wihumane.org or 414-431-6173 with additional questions.