

# Adopting a Shy Dog

By Jane Marshall Dog Trainer

Shy dogs and puppies can make wonderful family companions. Taking them home and watching them grow in confidence as they place their trust in you can be a very rewarding experience.

However, shy dogs, like all other personality types, can develop their own array of problems, which if left unaddressed can result in an unhappy pet and adoptive family. If not dealt with correctly, shyness can escalate into escaping, fear of noises, fear of strangers, submissive urination, inability to deal with new situations, and in extreme cases, even separation anxiety and aggression.

Some dogs are shy because of their genetic background, some breeds are just generally less bold and adventuresome. Other dogs can be shy because of a lack of socialization, they have had little experience of the world you require them to live in.

According to Dr. Ian Dunbar, a respected Animal Behaviourist, shyness is actually a normal adaptive trait in dogs. "It is natural for dogs to be wary of things that are novel and unfamiliar." However, because of the risk of dogs developing associated behavior problems, shyness must be addressed immediately. Although it may only take 2-3 weeks to build the confidence of a puppy less than 6 months, the older the dog is, the more commitment and time is required.

When working with shy or fearful dogs, owners invariably make a number of common mistakes. Because these dogs are very endearing and sweet and often "clingy" with their new family, there is an understandable tendency for new adopters to want to comfort and reassure these dogs. In their attempts to allay the dog's fears, many people actually end up re-enforcing and perpetuating the shy dog's fearful behaviors.

Comforting words and attention intended to reassure the dog are actually interpreted by the dog as approval for his shy behavior.

So, what can we do to help our shy new pet develop its confidence in the world and reach its full potential?

First, all dogs, whether shy or not need humane leadership (or "parenting") with a clearly defined set of rules for everyday living. These rules should be taught and enforced in a kind manner. All family members must agree to teach and help the dog with the same set of rules. Behaviorists now feel that many problems in our family dogs are created by the mixed signals we give them. Lack of consistency creates stress and worry.

Second, putting the dog on a leadership training program is essential. These "nothing in life is free" or "work for a living" programs are simple but very effective for developing an appropriate bond of trust and respect between you and your dog. The dog is required to perform a behavior (usually "sit") before he receives anything he cares for. This includes: before being fed, before having the leash put on, before being petted or before receiving a treat etc. If the dog likes to chase a ball also ask for a "sit" before you throw the ball.

Patience and kindness in this training program is essential for success. Shy dogs should NEVER ever be physically or even verbally reprimanded. Rewarding all the dog's successes and ignoring the mistakes will give the dog the confidence to keep trying.

As the shy dog is very prone to over-bond with his new family (putting him at risk for separation anxiety and protective aggression) several periods of each day should also be set aside for the dog to spend time by himself. A crate may be used for this or a baby gated area. A special chew toy should be given to make this down time more interesting. It is important that these "quiet" periods are practiced when the family is home and that they should be incorporated into the daily schedule. This time alone teaches the dog independence and the ability to entertain himself. This eases the transition to being by himself when you are out of the house.

For the same reasons of learning independence shy dogs should be discouraged from sleeping in bed with family members. However, a crate or dog bed within a family bedroom is an alternative.

All strangers visiting or interacting with the dog should be encouraged to offer him a food treat without staring or looming over him. If your shy dog has submissive urination problems instruct visitors to ignore the dog until seated. Then wait for the dog to approach your visitor before offering the treat.

Shy dogs should never be forced to interact with people they are afraid of; only by going at their own pace will they learn that people are a good thing.

Your part in helping the dog to overcome its fearfulness is to always use a bright tone of voice to encourage the dog to try new things. Ignore him when he is acting fearful, but reward with your voice and food treats any attempt to investigate a new object or person.

Enrolling in a good, positive obedience class is also highly recommended.

As your shy dog gains in confidence taking him out to different places to socialize him will become a fun project for both of you. Always work within the dogs comfort zone, your goal is for the dog to enjoy exploring the world and meeting new people with you.

If you do not have success with these simple adjustments to your dog's schedule or if your dog is extremely shy, showing signs of aggression or separation anxiety please call the Helpline for Dogs at 929-9115 or email: [m\\_dow@juno.com](mailto:m_dow@juno.com) or [jane3dog@yahoo.com](mailto:jane3dog@yahoo.com)