

FEARFUL PUPPIES

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When getting a new puppy, it's important to expose them to new people and environments during the first 16 weeks of their life.

Puppies who do not experience new things or encounter fear-inducing situations when young may become under-socialized and fearful.

Fearful puppies can develop into fearful dogs, or worse, can develop into dogs who display fear reactivity. Fortunately, there are many things you can do to help build your puppy's confidence and set them up for success.

Fearful Dog Body Language

Puppies can't tell us when they're scared, but they can show us. If your puppy is tucking their tail, crouching, cowering, lip licking, backing or running away, or being avoidant, these are all indications that they are having a fear response. If you see any of these behaviors, take them to a quiet, safe space, like a bedroom in your home and sit with them to reassure them until they seem secure again.

Positive Reinforcement Training

Training should focus on rewarding positive behaviors and building trust. Use lots of treats and gentle praise when your puppy shows playful and outgoing behaviors. Try to expose the puppy to positive interactions in the first several months. To find out how to expose your puppy to certain things, refer to the puppy socialization handout, and remember that socialization is about positive exposure. Seek out friendly, confident dogs to play with, introduce new people slowly, and socialize with children who will listen to your directions.

Avoid using punishment-based training methods, such as prong collars, e-collars, or scolding, which can increase your puppy's fearfulness. If these methods are used, they may take longer to learn to trust people. Remember, some puppies have had minimal experience interacting with people.

Slow Introductions

A fearful puppy will need continued socialization just like any other puppy, but additional caution should be used to prevent overwhelming them. When introducing new people, have them sit quietly in the room with your puppy and toss treats, encouraging the puppy to approach people on their own. Only introduce one person or dog at a time, and make sure they are friendly and willing to follow your directions. Introduce new environments slowly. You can even start with your backyard or the street in front of your home. That way, if the puppy becomes fearful, you can return home quickly to help them relax.

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Always Go at the Puppy's Pace

Every dog is unique, and there is no guaranteed timeline for how long it will take to build confidence in a fearful puppy. Some will come out of their shell faster than others. It is important to only push the puppy as far as they are ready to. You may need to be very patient! If a puppy is not ready to have a new experience, that's okay! If the puppy is allowed to progress at their own pace, they are more likely to be successful next time. If they have occasional setbacks, that is also to be expected. Just like us, puppies will have good and bad days.

Building Confidence

Basics: It's important to continue training with your puppy to help them build confidence. Teach them basic obedience commands, such as come, sit, and down, just like you would any other puppy. Practicing these basic skills builds confidence and improves your bond with your puppy.

Target Training: Target training is a useful skill to teach as well. Holding out the palm of your hand with a treat in your thumb, teach your puppy to "touch" your hand. Feed them the treat as soon as their nose touches your palm! This cue will be a good way to distract your puppy and will teach them to have a different response to what is scaring them instead of reacting.

Play: Find the toys and treats they really like! Engage in lots of playtime and fun training using these tools. The more fun and positive experiences a puppy has, the more confident they will be when confronting a scary situation.

TLC: Comfort your puppy! If your puppy has a fearful response to something, make sure to pet them and soothe them with a soft voice so they know they have a safe person to go to when they are fearful. This will not encourage them to be more fearful. In fact, it will actually help them be more successful when confronting something scary in the future.

Treats: Feed them lots of treats! Any time your puppy shows good behavior, such as choosing to greet a new person, sitting to ask for a treat, or exploring a new environment, give them treats and lots of praise. This will help your puppy see new things as fun and rewarding rather than scary.

Remember

Even if socialization is handled very carefully, your puppy may still retain some fearfulness for the rest of their life. If not handled carefully, fearfulness can develop into reactivity in the form of growling, snapping or biting. However, following these tips will greatly increase your chances of helping your puppy feel safe and secure. All puppies benefit from training and puppy socialization classes, so reach out to a positive reinforcement trainer and talk with them about your puppy's needs.

We are always here to help! You can find additional behavior and training resources at pasadenahumane.org/behavior.

Adapted from Northeast Animal Shelter

