

Shy or Fearful Dog

Different Kinds of Shyness

Some dogs are afraid of new people—or categories of people, like men or children. Some dogs are afraid of meeting people for the first time, but warm up eventually. Other dogs are afraid of new situations like visiting a friend's house for a barbecue or traveling in strange cars. Yet other dogs are afraid only of specific situations like going to the vet or being in crowds. Some dogs are sound sensitive; afraid of loud or sudden noises like a car backfiring, a vacuum cleaner, or children screaming.

What Does a Shy Dog Look Like?

Shy and fearful dogs might show their feelings by cowering, rolling onto their back, shaking, urinating, hiding, ducking, backing away, or going still. Other shy dogs have learned that growling, snarling, or barking will make the scary thing or person move farther away. Many people mistake these behaviors for aggression or protectiveness.

Why is a Dog Shy?

Some dogs are genetically predisposed to be shy. Their mom, dad, or other members of the litter may also be shy. In some dogs, shyness is a result of a bad experience in the past. But in the majority of cases, the culprit is under-socialization, which means not having seen enough of the world early in life. For example, if a dog grew up in a quiet, small-town neighborhood, he might be very startled by many new sounds and sights if he were to move to the big city.

What Can I Do?

Be understanding and patient. Do not push your dog into uncomfortable encounters and interactions if he is not ready. This could make matters worse. Other than that:

- Carry treats with you when you can, and dish them out whenever your dog sees something frightening. Cheer him on, and keep the encounters brief.
- Taking your dog to classes and working regularly on his training at home can really help build his confidence, provided the training is positive and upbeat.
- Learning games and tricks can be great confidence-builders for your dog, too.
- Call the Behavior and Training Department (703-746-5505) if your dog growls, snaps, or lunges at people or other dogs, if his shyness gets worse, or if he spends significant time shaking or hiding.

Will it Get Better?

Most shy dogs can become more confident over time, but don't expect too much too soon. The process is slow and gradual. If you have questions, please call us at 703-746-5505.