



Confidence Building

Dogs coming into a new home may be very scared of all the noises, new people, sights, smells, routines, and other animals (if applicable). We can use this protocol to help them ease into their new routine and help them realize that the world isn't as scary as they might think. Also see the Fearful script in this folder for more tips and guidelines on how to best help your fearful pup.

Classical Conditioning

This is the first thing we want to do with our fearful dogs, especially if they are too fearful to approach you, run away if you approach, or go out for a walk.

Teaching the Behavior

1. Sit beyond an arm's length of your dog and begin tossing them treats. It does not matter what the dog is or isn't doing; all you're focused on right now is classical conditioning and building the connection that your presence means good stuff.
2. Wait until you see social behaviors from your dog such as soft eye contact, softly wagging tail, relaxed body, etc.
3. Once you see social behavior hold out your hand and continue tossing treats. Your dog should willingly approach you on their own before attempting to leash them or otherwise interact with them.

Troubleshooting

- Is your dog not eating? Make sure you're using high-value treat such as hot dogs, cheese, chicken, etc. (unless they have medical dietary restrictions).
- Keep sessions short, approximately 5 to 10 minutes.
- Be sure to listen to what your dog is telling you. If you try pushing and fear or distance-increasing signals increase, then drop back to previous step. Don't push until you see relaxed and social behavior on each step.

Touch aka Hand Targeting

The touch is a very simple and often very useful cue. If a dog is fearful or hand-shy, then teaching this trick is a great way to build confidence or trust that people and their touch is a good thing or even a great thing.

Teaching the Behavior

1. Begin by holding out your hand off to your side, head level to the dog. Wait for the dog to walk up to your hand to inspect it.
2. Once they touch your hand with their nose, say "Touch," click and reward, giving a treat from your opposite hand. Repeat and begin alternating hands and the distance until they start immediately running towards your hand and pressing their nose up against it.

3. When the dog is consistently touching your hand without hesitation, you can start rewarding additional body contact. Any time the dog makes contact with you, be it their paw, shoulder, hind end etc., click and reward.

Troubleshooting

- Be patient, but if the dog loses focus, reset the game.
- Give lots of breaks.
- Time your click to take place just as the nose touches your hand.

Petting

It's the conundrum as old as time itself: We want to pet every dog but not every dog wants to be pet. Often the case with fearful dogs is that underneath it all, they actually are very social and enjoy being pet, but they are too scared to solicit or enjoy the attention. This will help your dog feel more comfortable with petting and, hopefully, help them open up more to receiving and even soliciting interactions.

Teaching the Behavior

1. Sit on the ground with your side turned towards the dog. You may lure the dog up to you but ideally your dog should be comfortable enough to approach you on their own before beginning this protocol.
2. When your dog is within an arm's length of you, slowly reach out your hand, briefly and gently petting them.
3. After approximately one to two seconds, disengage and offer them a treat
4. Continue to repeat steps 2 and 3 until your dog relaxes their body and face and is no longer showing fear of your reaching or touching them.

Tips

- Always remember to present the stimulus first, and then reward; in this case, reach, pet, then treat.
- Practice this protocol in the same place each time (same room, same yard, same office, etc.). Then, once your dog is comfortable with petting try moving to different locations, and try switching hands if you're prone to using the same hand each time.
- Start with less sensitive or invasive areas such as the dog's chest, head, side of neck and shoulders before moving onto to more sensitive places such as legs, back, sides, hind end, etc.
- Be sure the dog has a way to remove themselves if needed. Never block escape routes and disengage when your dog does, engage only when they do.

Troubleshooting

- Is your dog consistently being avoidant of you? Be sure you're not facing them head-on or leaning over them. Consider whether your treats are high-value and rewarding enough to outweigh their fear of being pet. You may also want to drop back to a previous protocol such as Touch to practice some more.
- Is your dog refusing or now seem fearful of the treats? Check that you're delivering the treats at the right time. Remember, it's stimulus first and then treat. If this has happened, then you'll likely need to find a different treat to use and drop back to previous steps or protocols.

Puzzle Toys for Confidence-Building

Puzzle toys or food-dispensing toys can be a great way for a nervous dog who is food-motivated to build confidence. There are lots of toys that all vary in their degrees of difficulty. Start with something easy, like a flat toy that has grooves and crevasses or a cardboard box with a handful of kibble and the ends taped shut, and let the dog play with the toy to figure out how to get the treats out. If those are too easy or they have mastered it after a few times, switch to another toy that's a little more difficult. Working (playing with the toy) to accomplish a goal and receive a reward (getting the food) will not only build their confidence but also provide important mental stimulation to help give them a mental workout!