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Helping Your Dog Overcome the Fear of People

Dogs and puppies fear people for different reasons. Maybe your puppy had inadequate early social experiences—puppies that do not have enough experiences with people of all ages and appearances during the first few months of life (the socialization period) can develop a strong fear of people and be particularly resistant to change. Some of your dog's fearful tendencies may have been inherited from his parents. Your dog could have had unpleasant experiences with people. He could have developed medical problems that affect his behavior, or he could be suffering from a combination of these problems.

No matter what the cause, the goal is to teach your dog to be relaxed around people. You can do this by carefully controlling the situations during which your pet is around unfamiliar people so that he is least likely to feel threatened and most likely to relax and have a positive experience. Do this carefully and frequently until your pet learns to look forward to being around people.

What not to do

Don't make the mistake of forcing socialization on your dog. The fearful pet needs to learn to be comfortable around people, but this must be done gradually. Encouraging visitors to come up and reach for a pet that is shaking and distressed will only make matters worse. If the dog feels trapped because he is being held or on a leash when someone approaches, he might even become aggressive. If you then try to console him when he growls fearfully, you may reinforce the aggressive behavior.

Be careful not to raise your voice, act anxious, or use punishment of any type. Since the goal of conditioning is to change the association with unfamiliar people to something that is positive, anything you do that is unpleasant may further increase the pet's fear and anxiety. Therefore, you must not use any physical or harsh correction, such as using a pinch collar, popping a choke collar, hitting, or yelling. Any of these responses are likely to heighten your pet's fear and anxiety.

Control social situations

The first thing you can do to make your dog more comfortable around people is to instruct visitors how to act around him: the less threatening the person appears to your pet, the better. Your dog will be more comfortable during greetings if the visitor is sitting or squatting, makes little or no eye contact, and keeps his hands to his side. A quiet tone of voice and slow body movements are also very important. Keep in mind that your dog will feel more comfortable if he has some freedom. Too much tension on the leash or holding the pet tightly will likely make him more nervous.

Help your dog relax with people

To lessen your pet's anxiety, you need to repeatedly associate something exceptionally special and positive with the presence of people. The idea is to change the pet's reaction from negative to positive. During training, the pet should be protected from any situations that are overwhelming to him. For example, avoid crowded areas during walks, and confine the pet to a quiet room during noisy social gatherings in the home.

Special food treats can help your dog warm up to people. Be sure to select treats or bits of food that he thinks are absolutely fabulous. Small pieces of white chicken meat, cheese, freeze-dried liver, or semi-moist dog treats are good choices for most dogs. To really enhance the association between food and unfamiliar people, these special treats should only be given during training sessions and greetings.

If your pet is extremely anxious around people, begin where he is the most comfortable—in your home or yard. Be certain that the dog has been reward-trained to sit and relax immediately on command in the absence of any fearful situations. If he has not, complete that training before beginning the exposure exercises. Begin the exposure training with an unfamiliar person standing at a far enough distance that your dog is relaxed and shows no sign of anxiety. Ask him to sit, and give him a small treat when he first sees the person. Then have the person move a step closer. Give your pet another treat if he stays relaxed. Gradually, ask the person to approach closer and closer. If your dog begins to show any signs of tension (e.g., won't take his eyes off the person, seems agitated, shows less interest in the reward), the person can side-step several times as you feed your pet, and then make another short approach. The exercise should go so slowly that the pet shows no significant signs of anxiety, such as trembling, pulling away from the person, or whining anxiously. Always end the session on a positive note, and begin the next session with the unfamiliar person at a distance that elicits no signs of anxiety in your dog.

Later, the pet should gradually be introduced to similar but progressively stronger stimuli, including quicker movements and various tones of voice used by the person who is approaching. You can use a head halter and leash if you need more control, especially if you suspect the pet might show signs of aggression. Head halters are a quick and effective way to close the dog's mouth, get eye contact, relax the pet, and take his eyes off the person until he settles down. Once your dog relaxes, release the tension on the head halter. If there is the potential for aggression, seek the assistance of a behavior specialist, who will develop a specific treatment plan for your pet.

There can be many specific things about a person that make a pet anxious, such as beards, glasses, hats, carried objects, uniforms, canes, wheelchairs, and tone of voice. Pay attention to what makes your pet most anxious, and avoid these stimuli in your initial training sessions. For example, if your dog is afraid of beards and glasses, wait until he is comfortable with people without beards and glasses before including them in the conditioning sessions. Once the dog is comfortable with the exposure exercises in the home, practice at various friends' homes, and then in a wide variety of situations. Slowly add "accessories," such as hats, large purses, sunglasses, and backpacks, and gradually change the type of person used in the conditioning exercises (e.g., man with a beard, person with a walker).

Drugs are not typically prescribed for pets that are afraid of people, but in severe cases, some antianxiety medications can be helpful. If your dog is exceptionally fearful, you may want to discuss this option with your veterinarian.

Prevent the fear reaction if you can

In most cases, dogs will not develop a fear of people if they have ample opportunities to socialize during the early months of life, are frequently handled in a gentle manner, and are raised without using harsh training techniques or physical punishment. Attending puppy classes can be an excellent way to ensure socialization with a variety of people, dogs, and environments.