

# How to Bring Out the Best in Your Shy Dog

Whether it's from improper socialization, a traumatic event or abuse, or even a genetic trait, a shy dog needs special care and love to feel safe. Here's how to create a home environment where he'll thrive.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If your dog is on the shy side, he may have had inadequate or incomplete socialization as a puppy, endured a traumatic event or abuse, or he may have a genetic predisposition to the trait of timidity
- Shy dogs typically display certain behaviors and body language, for example, cowering, shaking, hiding, and avoiding eye contact
- There are several things you should avoid subjecting your shy dog to, such forcing her to interact with people, other dogs, or in situations that make her fearful
- It's important to create a home environment for your shy dog that makes him feel safe, and provides opportunities to build his confidence
- It's also important to take steps to proactively manage your dog's stress

If your dog is more like a wallflower than the life of the party, there's a good chance she's shy. Shyness in canines is typically rooted in fear, and a dog's fear can have many causes, including:

- Insufficient or improper socialization during the first 10 weeks of life
- A traumatic event during the first 3 months of life that leaves a fear imprint
- Being injured, attacked, **abused**, or relinquished to a shelter, especially repeatedly
- Certain medical conditions
- Genetic predisposition

## Shyness Signs and Signals

Your dog's behavior and **body language** are tip-offs to her timidity, and can include some or all of the following signals, according to pet behaviorist Steve Duno:<sup>1</sup>

- Ears flattened
- Panting or shaking
- Raised hackles
- Cowering
- Dilated, glassy eyes

- Fear of eye contact
- Shying away from other dogs and/or people
- Skulking, pacing, hiding, or escaping
- Sneering, nipping, or biting
- Tail tucked
- Whining or barking
- Submissive urination

Some dogs are only shy around people, others display shyness only around other dogs, and some are timid in the presence of both people and pets. In addition, many shy dogs are very reactive to storms, fireworks, traffic, and other situations they perceive as threatening.

## 7 Things You Should NOT Do With or to Your Shy Dog

These are behaviorist Duno's don'ts for parents of shy, timid dogs:

1. **Don't** force your shy dog into situations you know or suspect she fears as a method of desensitizing her. It won't work, and it will only make things worse.
2. **Don't** subject him to dominant, force-based, punitive, or overbearing trainers.
3. **Don't** ask other people to make eye contact with your dog or reach for him. Instead, ask them to wait for the dog to approach them.
4. **Don't** force a dog who is hiding out of her hiding spot. Let her come out on her own. If you must get her out for some reason, gently coax her out with a treat and immediately attach her leash.
5. **Don't** have large groups of rowdy guests in your home (adults or kids), especially if your dog is **noise sensitive** and shy around people. Putting her in a separate room or in her crate will only increase her anxiety because she'll still hear the noise but won't be able to escape it.
6. **Don't** take your shy dog into noisy environments or areas with unpredictable activity, or to a fireworks display. Always think ahead and choose places you're reasonably sure won't cause her to be fearful.
7. **Don't** tie him outside a public place such as a coffee shop or store and leave him, because you'll make him a sitting duck for exposure to things he fears, and you won't be there to calm him or intervene if things go badly.

## Creating a Safe Home Environment for a Shy Dog

If your dog is on the shy side, it's important to set realistic goals — for him and for you. Take care not to expect an overnight change or a complete turnaround. It takes time to help a shy pet learn to look at the world differently and trust. Here are some general guidelines for creating a safe home environment for a shy pet:

- Make him feel loved and needed; communicate gently, consistently and clearly with him
- Don't force anything on her — provide her with her own safe place where she can be alone when she feels like it
- Protect him from whatever he fears

- Create opportunities for her to be successful and build confidence
- Feed a balanced, species-specific, fresh food diet and make sure your dog gets plenty of physical activity, including a minimum of 20 to 30 minutes of aerobic exercise each day, in a place and manner that ensures he feels safe

If you've rescued a shy dog or are considering adoption, I highly recommend a program called **A Sound Beginning**, which is designed to help rescue dogs and adoptive guardians learn to communicate effectively and form an unbreakable bond.

I have also fallen in love with Susan Garrett's game-based learning and training program, which you do in your own home. Learn more at **Recallers**. "Brain game" interactive toys also provide a way to "de-stress."

## 10 Things You Can Do to Reduce Your Dog's Stress

Regardless of the triggers and root cause of your dog's shyness, all timid dogs can benefit from stress reduction.

1. Make your home a safe space. Creating a place where your pup always feels secure is important. Make sure he always has access to an article of clothing or blanket with your scent on it and leave a treat-release toy for him to focus on in your absence. Place small treats around the house for him to discover, along with a few toys.
2. Add a flower essence blend from Solutions to her drinking water, and put on some soothing doggy music before you leave.
3. Invest in an Adaptil collar or diffuser for your dog. These products release a pheromone that's designed to have a calming affect on dogs.
4. Make sure your dog gets plenty of non-threatening exercise, playtime, mental stimulation and TLC. The more full her life is, the calmer she'll feel.
5. Play calm, soothing music before a possible stressor occurs. This may relax your dog and have the added bonus of drowning out distressing noises.
6. If your dog seems to respond well to pressure applied to her body, there are wraps available (e.g., Thundershirt, TTouch anxiety wrap) that many pet owners and veterinarians find extremely helpful.
7. **Ttouch** is a specific massage technique that can help anxious pets.
8. Calming natural products and nutraceuticals that can be of benefit include those that include holy basil, L-theanine, rhodiola, ashwagandha, GABA, 5-HTP, chamomile and calming milk proteins (variety of brands). Hyland's Calms Forte can also be beneficial. Consult your integrative vet for dosing. Rotating through a variety of products usually works best.
9. Give your pup a fun "job," like **nose work** (which is an interactive activity that can be played around the house or yard). Dogs who are able to use their brains for learning and discovery produce fewer stress hormones.
10. The essential oil of lavender has also been proven to reduce a dog's stress response. I recommend placing a few drops on a cotton ball by your dog's bedding before a stressor occurs or diffuse the oil around your house for an overall calming effect.

It's also important to note that dogs can be quite sensitive to the effects of household electro-magnetic fields (EMFs). Consider giving your dog a Wi-Fi-free zone and also a **grounding mat**.

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [Modern Dog Magazine](#)

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