

# Advice Sheet 11

## Nervous Dogs

Nervousness is a trait usually inherited from a dog's parents. Nervous dogs need extra care when being introduced to new situations or people, as they are naturally more cautious than other dogs. It is therefore vital that, as a puppy, they are properly socialised and regularly exposed to situations where they will receive positive experiences. Great care must be taken so as not to overwhelm or scare the puppy or adult dog.

Some of the signs, when nervous, may be subtle and go unnoticed. The dog may lick lips, look away, yawn or try to back away and hide. If you notice these signs, prevent increasing the nervousness by either moving your dog away from the situation or doing something else your dog enjoys to help distract them. This also helps your dog to associate the situation with something pleasant.

If the first subtle signs are not noticed (or ignored) the dog may begin to cower, tuck the tail between the legs and pant. Do not force your dog into situations like this in an attempt to help your dog get used to it. If continually forced into situations and unable to escape, your dog may resort to growling, lunging forward or snapping in an attempt to remove whatever is causing the nervousness.

If this happens, it is important that the dog is not punished for this behaviour, as this will only intensify the reaction, and your dog will learn that aggression is effective at keeping scary situations away. Punishing a frightened dog may also result in your dog becoming afraid of you and even biting you in defence. It is better to watch out for the early signs and move the dog away before there is a need for self protection.

Some dogs may be nervous of specific things such as loud noises or strangers. This usually happens after one or two really frightening encounters, or if the dog has never met a similar situation. This can be helped by controlled exposure to the specific event, linked with something your dog likes to do, such as play or food treats. However, this must be done under the guidance of an animal behaviourist recommended by your vet.

If you have a nervous dog (that has not shown any aggression) you can help prevent defensive actions by being patient and taking things slowly. Observe

your dog carefully and when you notice the first signs of nervousness, move your dog away from the situation to relax. Keeping your dog in the situation with reassurances only reinforces nervousness but, by moving away, you have taken control and shown that your dog can trust you to be a protector.

When you are aware of the situations your dog is afraid of, avoid them, but whilst stuck in a difficult situation start to build confidence by encouraging your dog to play with you and a favourite toy. You can also teach simple commands so your dog is under your control. Keeping a dog occupied is a useful way to take the mind off scary situations and the physical effort will also help to keep your dog relaxed and comfortable in these surroundings.

When your dog is keen to play with you and is responding to your commands, begin to resocialise your dog to the situations in which your dog was nervous. Gradually expose your dog to the situations, keeping your dog at a safe distance and watching for any signs of nervousness. Before the dog reacts nervously, encourage a short game with a toy or have a short, fun training session. Repeat this at the safe distance as often as you can.

As your dog gains confidence and relaxes you can gradually move the animal closer and closer until your dog no longer shows any sign of nervousness. This may take many weeks. Whenever your dog copes well with a scary situation, reward with food and lots of praise. If your dog is defensive it is important that you discuss the problem with your vet who may refer you to an animal behaviour counsellor to help resolve the problem. Meanwhile, walking your dog in a head collar, such as a Gentle Leader, will give you much more control of the situation.

Gradually building up confidence will ensure your dog enjoys a more active and varied lifestyle, as you can go to more places together. It is also rewarding to help a nervous dog turn into a happy family dog that can fully participate in the family's activities.

APBC Members can help you to help your nervous dog. Go to [www.apbc.org.uk](http://www.apbc.org.uk) for details of your nearest member.



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