

# Creating a Shy Puppy

By Denise Collins

In a well-meaning attempt to calm our dog's fears, many owners end up actually reinforcing the dog's shy behavior. If you stroke, cradle or hug your dog while saying things like, 'Oh poor baby, it's OK, there's nothing to be afraid of,' the dog doesn't understand your words. But, he does understand that he is receiving a gentle, soothing reward by your actions and tone of voice. The dog concludes it is doing the right thing by acting nervous because of your praise. In effect, you are inadvertently training the dog to be more fearful. Be careful not to reinforce your dog's fearfulness by offering reassurance.

When a timid dog hides, barks defensively, whines, screams or snaps, DO NOT pet or pick up your dog. These actions flagrantly reward the dog for fearful behavior. It is best to just completely ignore your dog when he acts fearful. Let him learn by his own experience that there is nothing to be afraid of. Save your praise and reassurance for times when your dog acts with confidence.

Many owners try to rehabilitate their dog too quickly, forcing him to socialize with other dogs and people. This usually reinforces the dog's view that other dogs and people are frightening. The dog needs to be socialized as quickly as possible, but he should not be forced into it. If you push your dog to do too much too soon, your dog will only become more fearful and may be forced into a situation where he feels he must defend himself (fear biting).

Socializing a dog and helping him build his confidence is a time-consuming task. Thrusting him into the arms of every visitor and dragging him out to socialize with many other dogs can be counter-productive. Strangers should never be allowed to approach your dog to pet him. You as leader need to block, if you have to, an adult or child approaching your dog to pet him. Make sure you always have really good treats wherever you go and ask the person or child to toss a treat to your dog. It should be left to your dog if he wants to smell the person. If your dog does not want to approach, that is OK. Just give him plenty of time to 'hide and peek' and eventually he will come out of hiding. It's up to you to provide ample opportunity for socialization, but it is up to the dog to proceed at his own pace. The critical socialization period is from 8-12 weeks of age. Socialization most easily occurs before the puppy is 3 months old. Any later than that and it becomes a difficult and time-consuming process. Your patience and commitment are necessary to help your pup achieve a calm life.

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