



Be Dog Confident

Handy tips and advice for all the family on how to build confidence around dogs



Dogs Trust, Ireland's largest dog welfare charity, has launched **Be Dog Confident**. This is an initiative within our successful **Be Dog Smart** campaign, and it aims to help children and families build confidence around dogs and manage low-level anxiety around them.

We commissioned research and discovered that 17% of children under the age of 13 are very anxious around dogs, while 32% are a little anxious. That means that 49% of this age group have some level of dog-related anxiety. Our research highlights the need to build confidence around dogs from a young age. 27% of parents think a larger dog affects their child's confidence, while 50% think their child may not know how to appropriately react to an approaching dog.

As part of our campaign, Dogs Trust is offering FREE resources and workshops in schools and in the community. These workshops give helpful advice and handy tips to acknowledge and address anxiety around dogs, and they show you how you can help your child to cope. With over 40%* of Irish households owning a dog, it is likely that a child will come into contact with one, either in the local park, on the street or even while visiting friends and family. We want to help children build their confidence around dogs so that they feel less anxiety when they encounter one. This will be beneficial to both the child and the dog.

* Dogs Trust Behaviour & Attitudes Survey 2019



Supporting your child

In this booklet you'll find handy tips and practical information to help your child build their confidence around dogs and keep safe when out and about.

At Dogs Trust, we understand not everyone is comfortable being around dogs, and we know some people may also be scared of them. This can impact a child's life, from not wanting to play in the park or visit friends, to being worried about walking down the street in case they see a dog.

This guide is aimed at helping children between the ages of 7 and 13. Please note, the advice contained in this booklet will not produce an instant fix. Support from family and friends will be required to reinforce the tips over a period of time.



What is anxiety?

Worry and anxiety are normal feelings, and they are important for our protection. A certain amount of anxiety is good as it keeps us safe and stops us from going headfirst into risky situations.

Anxiety's 'job' is to protect us from immediate danger. When a fear response is triggered, it's like a fire alarm, going off to alert us to danger. We call this our 'anxiety alarm'. When our anxiety alarm goes off, neurochemicals are released into the body and trigger our 'fight-flight-freeze' response. This prepares our body to defend itself. For example, our hearts beat faster to pump blood to our muscles so we have the energy to run away or fight off danger. When we freeze, we hope we may not be noticed, allowing the danger to pass. Once the fear chemicals have been released into the body, there is nowhere for them to go. This may lead to things like headache, tummy ache, shaking and increased heart rate. This is called anxiety.

Sometimes, however, we can experience these anxious feelings without a real threat in front of us. If you are anxious of something that you can see every day, like dogs, it can have a debilitating impact on day-to-day life. Many people are anxious or afraid of something, from spiders and snakes to deep water or the number 13. No matter how obscure or silly it may seem, anxiety is not something to be dismissed as irrational, and it should be treated appropriately. For someone who has anxiety around something, the fear is very real for that person. Cynophobia, or fear of dogs, is an extremely common phobia. It is important to know how to handle this anxiety to keep yourselves and others safe. In this guide, we set out how to do just that, providing the whole family with help and advice on how to manage anxiety around dogs.



The 5 most common reasons for being afraid of dogs



1. Bad experience with a dog



2. Learned behaviour from parent, relative or friend



3. Playful dog behaviour like barking, jumping up or running around



4. Cultural differences



5. Influence of the media

How to manage your child's anxiety

- Acknowledge everyone can experience feelings of anxiety at times. Anxiety is different for everybody, but is also very normal.
- Anxiety can be seen as an equation, consisting of an overestimation of danger and an underestimation of coping.
- We should confront anxiety rather than avoid it. Avoidance reduces anxiety temporarily, but continued avoidance can worsen the problem. Confronting it shows us we can handle the situation, and our anxiety loses its control over us.
- Encouraging children to open up about their anxieties and worries is helpful, along with teaching them about what anxiety is. See 'what is anxiety?' on page 4.
- Helping them to recognise when they are experiencing anxiety, reinforcing that it is OK to feel this way and showing them what they can do to alleviate it, are good ways to manage children's anxiety.
- It is important to teach children that anxiety is not dangerous - it may go up due to a trigger, but it will come down again and eventually pass. View it like a ball - what goes up must come down.



Practical techniques to support your child

A number of factors contribute to anxiety - these include thoughts, feelings, physiology and behaviour. Depending on how these interact with each other, your child can experience negative thoughts. This can have an impact on our emotions (how we feel), our physiology (how our body feels, e.g. racing heart) and our behaviour (what we actually do).

Therefore, if your child is experiencing negative thoughts about dogs, altering those thoughts can lead to a change in emotion and a subsequent change in behaviour. This is how we can start to manage anxiety.

So what can I do?

- 1. Give** permission for them to experience their emotions – ‘That’s OK, I understand you are worried about the dog.’ This gives a message that emotions are OK and are useful things to have. This conveys understanding.
- 2. Recognise** how your child is feeling through their body language . Label how they are feeling and why – ‘I wonder if you are feeling worried because you can hear a dog barking nearby?’ This will help them to feel understood.



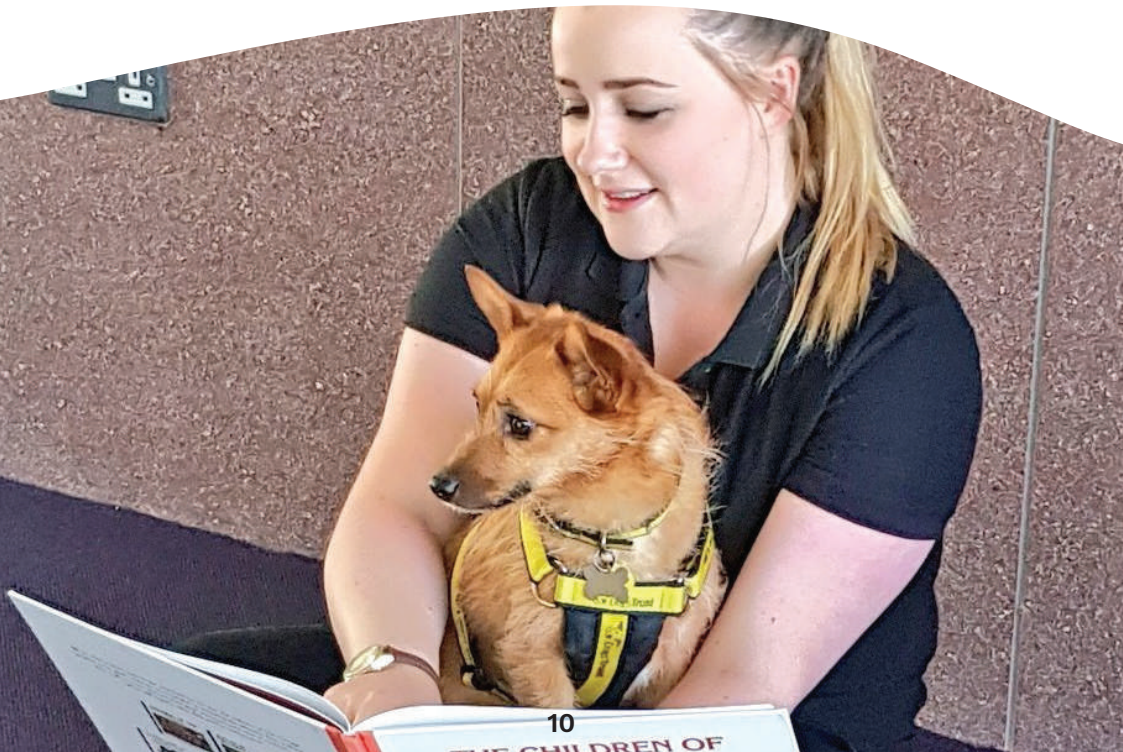
- 3. Identify** whether their thoughts are helpful or unhelpful. Most of the time they will be unhelpful thoughts, although their feelings will of course be valid. If they think a dog will bite them, they will naturally feel scared. However, we cannot always trust the feelings that result from unhelpful thoughts.
- 4. Encourage** them to be ‘thought detectives’ by questioning their unhelpful thoughts. Asking them questions such as: ‘Is that really true?’, ‘Is that really going to happen?’, ‘Are there any times when you pass a dog and he doesn’t jump up/bite?’, ‘Are you 100% sure?’ and ‘How/where have you experienced this?’. If the dog is on a lead, then point this out to your child and explain that the dog cannot come over to you. This will reassure them that they are safe. Please note, not all dogs will be on a lead. They might be off lead in a safe place to release some energy. You can of course ask the owner to put the dog on a lead if needs be. However, do try to practise the coping methods in this booklet so so your child can cope better if they come across a dog off-lead.
- 5. Teach** your child how to do calm breathing. This technique helps us take control and change the direction of the anxiety to provide a more positive outcome. This is a tool your child can use anywhere, at any time! Other people will probably not even notice when your child is using this tool. For older children and teens, explain that taking short, quick breaths actually increases other feelings of anxiety (e.g. racing heart, dizziness or headaches). Calm breathing will slow down their breath and heart rate.



6. Use a stepped approach to engage with dogs and change your child's perceptions of them.

- Talk positively about dogs.
- Readbooks with pictures of dogs in them.
- Watch films where the leading star is a dog.
- Practice role play. Use small figures or toys to act out scenarios that your child may feel anxious about. Practise what they might do in those situations.
- If possible, build up to touching a dog while they are being held by their owner.
- When ready, move on to spending time with dogs that are calm.

Please note – the above pointers are for long-term reinforcement with your child. If you are in an immediate situation and your child starts to feel anxious, remember points 2, 4 and 5. Reassure them that it is OK to feel anxious. Question if the dog can get over to them – are they on a lead? Suggest it may be a friendly dog that just wants to say hello. Then move into the calm breathing technique and focus on distractions and pleasant thoughts.



The Calm Breathing Technique

Take a slow breath in (for five seconds) while thinking of something you like or focusing on positive thoughts, such as:

‘I choose to breathe slowly’ and ‘I breathe in confidence’.

Exhale slowly (for five seconds), again thinking of something you like or focusing on helpful thoughts such as:

‘I choose to breathe slowly’ or ‘I breathe out fear’.

Repeat for at least five to 10 breaths.

If needs be, parents can assist their child by breathing with them, and saying ‘breathe in confidence’ and ‘breathe out fear’, with each inhale and exhale lasting about five seconds.

Calm Breathing for Younger Children

A fun way to teach a younger child how to do calm breathing is the ‘bubble blowing’ technique. Using a toy soap bubble container and wand (available at any toy store), have your child practise blowing bubbles. The breathing required for blowing soap bubbles is the same as that used for calm breathing. Simply make sure your child waits a second or two before blowing another bubble. Then practise ‘blowing bubbles’ without a bubble wand.

Although the ‘bubble blowing’ is a great way to practise calm breathing, it is important to remind your child that they are doing this to learn how to breathe calmly. In other words, do not simply ask your child to blow bubbles without explaining how it is used to help to manage anxiety.



Top Tips for Parents

If you are having issues with your child's anxiety, always remember to remain

CALM:

Create a positive dog experience with your child by exposing them to books and films with good, fun or helpful dog characters.

Acknowledge your child's discomfort around dogs. Anxiety is a normal feeling, and by acknowledging our anxiety, we can often learn to deal with it or even overcome it.

Let your child meet appropriate dogs in a safe and controlled environment. If they are still not feeling confident, teach them how to do slow breathing – breathe in for five seconds and out for five seconds.

Make believe with toy dogs, and talk through behaviours that dogs might exhibit. Explain what these might mean and that dogs have thoughts and feelings just like people.



Please note – it is not a good idea to get a dog to overcome your child's anxiety. Children need to understand and address their own anxiety first, without feeling the pressure of having a dog in the house. If this did not work out, it could also lead to the dog being rehomed – a risk we would not like people to take. We must remember that dogs are sentient beings.

And please don't forget, if you own a dog, more dogs are likely to come over to you when out walking them. This can be overwhelming for a child who is anxious around dogs.

Although these tips can help children to build their confidence around dogs, some children may need extra help to overcome stronger anxieties they might have in the presence of dogs.



Workshops

If you are a primary school teacher or an adult interested in our **Be Dog Confident** workshops, you can book a workshop via your local Education and Community officer.

Please visit:

www.BeDogConfident.ie

Dogs Trust's Education and Community officers have been given guidance on how to support children and their families when managing an anxiety of dogs. If the anxiety is at a high level, further professional advice should be sought. If you are looking for additional professional advice, please contact your GP.

www.DogsTrust.ie

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