



Building Confidence

All dogs are individuals, just like people, and some are naturally more confident than others. It's important to help cautious dogs grow in confidence, because dogs that develop anxieties and fearfulness can experience problems and find life extra difficult at times!

If your dog appears to lack confidence or is a little shy, don't worry! There are lots of things you can do to help improve your dog's confidence no matter how shy they are.

Helping your dog grow in confidence

Recognise when your dog is afraid

- Some dogs become quiet and subdued
- Some dogs become 'hyperactive' and loud
- Some dogs shiver and whimper
- Some dogs display actions aimed at defending themselves, such as running away, hiding, cowering or lunging/barking/growling

Once you can recognise how your dog behaves when they're afraid, you can start making a note of exactly which types of environment, situation or interaction bring about this behaviour. Our Body Language handout has lots of information on recognising some of the more subtle signs of anxiety and fear. Become a body language expert so that you can identify how your dog is feeling.

Avoid 'scary things'

Dogs that are frequently faced with things that scare them (especially things that are hard to predict or avoid) are generally more anxious and reactive. Make a list of anything that scares your dog – this could include loud noises, car travel, meeting other dogs or people, raised voices, grooming, the Hoover etc. Work your way through the list thinking about which things can be avoided and how. For example, if your dog is frightened by the Hoover – can you Hoover whilst your dog is outside the house?

If you can easily avoid some of these things do so, but if you can't, think about how to lessen their impact. For example, muffle loud noises by having the radio on, make the car as comfortable as possible by adding a familiar blanket, or consider trying to use a positive distraction like a tasty chew if your dog will accept it.

If your dog is frightened, move away. Now you know what scares your dog and how they are likely to respond, the next step is to make sure that if your dog is showing you they are scared, you help by moving them away from the situation. Getting your dog to 'face their fear' could

make matters worse, and if they feel they cannot escape a scary situation there is a risk that they may show aggression. Providing a cosy den at home can help give your dog the option to hide away for some quiet time should they choose to.

Avoid training techniques that cause pain, discomfort or fear!

Whatever you're teaching your dog, using punishment is counterproductive as it could actually worsen the problem by making your dog confused about you and even more worried – sometimes you're nice and fun but other times you're cross, your dog really can't understand why! Changing your dog's behaviour using positive, reward-based training techniques is much more effective and is great for building a strong bond with your dog. Because you'll always be rewarding his good behaviours he'll enjoy being trained by you and will have greater confidence in you!

Reward bravery and don't be tempted to coax your dog into a scary situation

Always reward brave or investigative behaviour. Let's say your dog is a little nervous, but comes forwards to sniff something by themselves, or they hear a noise that they may usually react to but remain relaxed in their bed - this is the perfect time to reward them with lots of praise, play and extra tasty treats.

Make sure rewards are always given in direct response to your dog's brave behaviour, rather than using a treat to coax them into a scary situation. Luring your dog into a situation that frightens them doesn't remove the fear itself and so can make the problem worse.

Have fun with your dog

Engage your dog in things they love to build up a bank of positive, confidence-boosting experiences. Try to do something they love every day, for example:

- learning new tricks with reward-based training
- playing hide and seek with treats or toys
- having some quiet time with you
- destroying cardboard boxes (look through your recycling and save anything safe and fun to play with)
- playing a variety of different games – tuggy, fetch and puzzle-toys that release food are fun!
- going on walks in areas they enjoy
- playdates with known doggy friends that your dog really likes

When to contact a qualified behaviourist

You may need professional assistance to help your dog to overcome established fears, especially if they are easily triggered or cause aggressive behaviour. You should also consider seeing a qualified behaviourist if your dog is experiencing high levels of general anxiety – for example if they show a fearful reaction to a wide range of things or seem constantly 'on edge' and unable to relax.

Contact your vet for a medical check-up, to make sure there aren't any health factors that might be making matters worse and ask your vet to refer you to a qualified behaviourist for expert help.

**Dogs Trust provide lifelong behavioural support for all our adopted dogs.
If you need help for your Dogs Trust Dog please email: reception@dogstrust.ie**

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