



## FIREWORK FEAR AND YOUR DOG

If a dog hasn't been safely exposed to many different experiences, including loud noises during his essential 'socialisation' period, when he gets older he may not be able to cope with novel, frightening sounds like fireworks or loud engine noises. We also find that certain breeds of dogs seem to be more sensitive to noises than others and dogs that are generally anxious or unhappy will also find it much harder to cope. Left alone, noise phobias tend to get worse over time, rather than better, so you really do need to act to help your dog, if he's scared on fireworks night.

Even though the noise level is supposed to be controlled there is little that can be done about the fireworks themselves, so sadly we have to learn to live with them. How can you help your faithful firework-phobic friend get through firework nights? Here are some tips:

- If your dog has only recently developed a sensitivity to fireworks or noises, try to **act as if there is nothing to be scared of** – jolly him along and praise him for responding positively.
- If your dog has a serious or long-standing phobia, **give him attention if he needs it** – he'll be too scared for this to act as a reward, so it won't encourage the unwanted behaviour and instead he will benefit from the comfort that this gives him. Essentially though, **try to find out what helps him to cope and be sure to let him do this** – e.g. letting him hide under the table – don't try to coax him out, if this is where he feels safest – he'll come out when he's ready and then you can praise him.
- At very noisy times around Bonfire night, **provide your dog with a safe hiding place** in his favourite room of the house, close the curtains and turn up the volume of your television or radio to drown out the firework noises. Remember not to shut any internal doors, as he may feel trapped and panic.
- **Don't leave your dog alone** in the house, as he may panic and injure himself.
- **A stodgy high-carbohydrate meal** (e.g. well-cooked white rice, pasta or mashed potato) with cooked chicken, turkey or white fish, in the late afternoon may help make your dog feel more sleepy and calm during the evening. Also make sure he goes out to toilet before it gets dark and the fireworks start.
- **Try to keep your dog busy** with games or reward-based training, to keep his mind off the noises.
- **Ask your vet about DAP** – Dog Appeasing Pheromone. This is a scent which you can't smell that comes in a plug-in diffuser, spray or collar that can comfort your dog and help him cope with his fears.
- For dogs with very severe fears on the worst nights, **your vet may be able to prescribe a diazepam-type drug**. This will not stop your dog from being scared on the night, but causes short term memory loss, so that he won't remember being scared in the morning. This stops the cycle of fear becoming worse, but it is important to do some training to lessen the problem for the next time. Other sedative drugs tend to make the problem worse.
- **Ask your vet about other drugs** – there are now several drugs and 'nutraceuticals' available which reduce anxiety levels for dogs. They tend to take some days to have an effect so they cannot be used for short periods but they are often useful to help during behavioural therapy.
- **Ask your vet about homeopathic remedies that some owners find may help** – such as Bach Rescue Remedy.

If fear reactions are severe or cause aggression in your dog, you must see a behaviourist on referral from your vet. The behaviourist may want to put your dog on a supervised or tailored desensitisation programme – but this will only work if you start long before the firework season begins. Remember that medical conditions can also cause phobias in your dog, so if he displays signs of phobia, it may be best to get him checked out by your vet anyway.

Although each case is different, we often find that the key to solving noise phobias is to help the dog feel generally safer in life - as many of these dogs will also have other underlying fears and anxieties that make it impossible for them to cope when the really scary events happen.

How can you make your dog feel generally safer? You may want to start by providing your dog with a confident but calm canine friend who he can learn appropriate behaviour from, have constant companionship with and feel safer with as part of a stable group. There are other ways of improving feelings of safety which will also need to be put into place (please see our Behaviour Problems factsheet for info), but we believe that finding an appropriate doggy friend is often the first step in rehabilitation for a noise phobic dog.

## Habituating your puppy to firework noises

‘Habituation’ is teaching a puppy that something is not scary and should be ignored. It is always easier to prevent problems from occurring, than to fix them, so it can really help to habituate your puppy to loud noises while he is still young – preferably when he still has the support of his mum and littermates, so hopefully some of this work will already have been done by your breeder or the Rehoming Centre.

This programme can be used with confident puppies, however, if your puppy is generally anxious you need to be very careful not to make this worse and actually create a fear of noises with this programme! If your puppy is at all anxious and is the only dog in the house, having a nice, friendly, calm adult dog around to visit and act as a surrogate mum or dad during this programme will really help – but remember that the older dog must already be well-habituated to noises, or the pup may learn to be scared by watching the reaction of the adult dog. If you are in any doubt as to your puppy’s ability to cope with this programme, please do not use it and seek the advice of your vet.

The trick is to associate firework noise with something nice for your puppy, so that he learns that noises are nothing to be scared of. You can do this by playing firework noise very quietly and then gradually louder, whenever he is enjoying himself. Remember - it is essential that your puppy is not scared at any time during this programme, or you may do more harm than good.

Here’s what you need to do:

**Obtain a sound recording of fireworks noises.** Several companies produce these. If you have any problems finding one, try the following:

- Sound Therapy 4 Pets Ltd - [www.soundtherapy4pets.com](http://www.soundtherapy4pets.com)
- Crosskeys Books –[www.crosskeysbooks.com](http://www.crosskeysbooks.com)

**Now make a list of all the things that your puppy loves in life and which produces natural excitement.** A list may look like this:

- When you are having a fun game.
- When you get your puppy’s lead out prior to a walk.
- When a family member returns home, having been out without the puppy.
- When the family are sitting together and your puppy is having cuddles.

List as many things as you can (please note that this should not include feeding times).

## The programme

### 1. Have your puppy in the room with you, making sure he is quite relaxed and lying down.

Do not make him lie down; wait until he does so of his own accord.

- Put your CD in the stereo and make sure the volume is set as low as it can be.
- Start the CD and watch your dog carefully. Slowly turn the volume up whilst watching your puppy until he shows a sign that he can hear the noise by acknowledging it. This may be by lifting one ear or his head up, but under no circumstances should he show any fear behaviour. Then reduce the volume one notch.
- Mark the volume on your stereo and then switch it off.

### 2. For the next two weeks you will need to use the following programme:

- Every day, switch your stereo on at the volume which you have previously set, just prior to one of the events you have on your list that makes your puppy naturally excited.
- Leave the recording running all the time the puppy is naturally excited, switching it off again as the excitement dies down.

On completion of the above, the puppy should be showing no fear when the CD is playing at the set volume, but instead should be associating the noise with the exciting events on your list.

### 3. Then the following should be done until your puppy is happy and relaxed with the recording playing:

- Continue as above, but now gradually increase the volume on the stereo every day, linking this to exciting events on your list.
- If you reach a level on the volume that causes any fear reaction in your puppy, reduce the volume a little until there is no fear reaction and slowly work it up again.

If you have completed this programme successfully, the reaction you should expect from your puppy when you play the noises is one of excitement (or at the very least he'll just ignore it), rather than fear behaviour, as he'll now associate the noise with something about to happen that he loves.

**If you experience any fearful reactions from your puppy whilst using this programme, you must stop immediately and ask your vet to refer you to a behaviour specialist. If your dog was adopted from Dogs Trust, please contact the relevant Rehoming Centre directly for behavioural advice.**

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