

## **Training the Fearful Dog**

**Beth Bradley**

When training dogs, we must sometimes teach them to overcome an instinctive response—such as chasing fast moving objects or animals. When working with a fearful dog, however, it is often the human handler's instinctive response that must be overcome! Humans, like most mammals, have an instinctive response to sounds of distress. It can be difficult to overcome that instinctive response, especially when the whimpering and whining is coming from your own beloved dog. You want to relieve his distress, but with a fearful dog, the wrong kind of attention will actually prolong or increase his distress.

One of the most common mistakes people make is petting and fussing over a nervous, anxious, or fearful dog. You think you are reassuring your dog with solicitous attention, but in fact, you are reinforcing his fear.

### **The Only Thing Worse Than Fear... is Reassurance.**

To understand the effect attention has on a fearful dog, imagine you are sitting on a plane, feeling a little nervous about flying. Before take-off, instead of the usual spiel about seatbelts, the airline attendant says, "Don't worry, folks. Everything is OH-KAAAAY. This plane won't crash. Our airline has had very few crashes this year. Everything is OK. Just sit back and relax. You've got nothing to worry about. Don't worry. We are NOT GOING TO CRASH." Most likely, all that reassurance has actually made you feel MORE nervous, not less. By giving extra attention to your fears, the attendant has validated them. The same thing happens when you try to soothe your anxious dog. You think you are communicating comfort and reassurance. What your dog is receiving, however, is the message that his fears are real, valid, and worthy of attention.

Petting and attention should not be given when your dog is nervous and fearful. Giving attention to an anxious dog is affirmation that his state of mind is appropriate to the situation and that you approve and encourage the corresponding behavior. It's as if the flight attendant not only validated your fears, but also gave you a free cocktail for screaming!

### **Confidence vs. Comfort**

So how can you help your dog? Rather than comfort him with soft words, build his confidence by giving him something to do that warrants positive attention. Tell him to *sit*, *down*, or *heel* and expect him to obey. Correct him if he does not. Giving a command accomplishes three things.

- First, it gives your dog something to focus on other than his anxiety.
- Second, expecting obedience communicates to your dog that everything is normal and that you, his leader, have everything under control.
- Finally, praising obedience gives you the opportunity to give your anxious dog some attention without rewarding the anxiety itself.

Do not allow your dog to get away with disobedience when you feel sorry for him in his nervous state. Dogs feel safest and most confident when they feel their leader is in control and when they know what to expect. Your dog expects you to praise for obedience and correct for disobedience. When you fail to correct disobedience, you introduce uncertainty into a situation your dog already finds frightening. His interpretation of your unexpected lenience will be that if you are not enforcing the rules, things must be even worse than he thought! From his perspective, it's a desperate situation and nobody is in charge!

### **Baby Steps, Not Baby Talk**

Many people think they must socialize a shy or fearful dog with as many interactions as possible. However, too much, too soon is counterproductive. There is no "quick fix" for a fearful dog. Forcing your dog to interact with others makes him feel that you do not protect him.

If his fear is deep and long-standing, you will need to desensitize him gradually. If he is fearful of other dogs, initially walk him when you are not likely to encounter strange dogs. If he is fearful of traffic noises and/or busy streets, initially walk him on quieter side streets. Give your dog the best chance for success by minimizing the "fear factor" while you build his confidence with consistent obedience expectations. Then, little by little, introduce elements of whatever it is that frightens your dog. Take baby steps, but at each step continue to expect obedience. Do not coax your dog into obedience with baby talk. Give commands in your normal tone of voice. Remain patient, but firm. Be calm and consistent.

## Taking Things in Stride

As your dog's leader, it is important that you deserve the trust you expect from him. Do not let dogs or people approach or impose an interaction on him. Don't expect that you can socialize him by turning him loose in a dog park. Such forced interactions communicate that you are not protecting him and that he must worry about these things himself. However, even when you are vigilant and careful, unexpected problems can occur. If your dog experiences a frightening event or an altercation with another dog, remain calm and matter-of-fact. Either get past or remove your dog from the situation by walking with your dog in proper heel position. Walking away while maintaining the heel position has several benefits.

- It demonstrates for your dog that you are taking the event in stride. . . literally.
- It returns your dog's focus to you, rather than whatever just frightened him.
- It demonstrates for your dog that your expectations have not changed: everything is under control and you are still his competent leader.
- It expends some of the adrenaline-fueled energy your dog has from the encounter.

Obviously, walking away assumes no significant injuries have occurred. Needless to say, if your dog is seriously injured, your first priority is to get immediate medical attention.

Once you have walked off some nervous energy, you can tell your dog to *stand* while you check for any minor injuries you may not have initially noticed. Do not undermine the confident, calm tone you have established by reverting now to "poor doggie" talk. Tell your dog "good *stand*" but do not let your words or tone suggest that the incident was significant enough to merit sympathy or fear. Giving positive attention for obedience to the *stand* command communicates to your dog that everything is normal and under control. Don't go overboard. Remember, too much petting and praise for a frightened dog sends the message that there actually IS something to be worried about. Your dog will take his cues from you. If *you* take the incident in stride, *he* will be more likely to take it in stride. Your calm response can minimize the long-term impact on your dog.

## **Conclusion**

It is difficult to hold back from petting and soothing your dog or puppy when he is fearful. Nonetheless, resist that urge! Coddling your dog might make you feel better, but it will make poor Fido's fears worse. The kindest thing you can do to relieve your dog's distress is to be his leader. Show him by your attitude and actions that you are not worried. If you truly want to comfort your fearful dog, then comfort him through confidence!

### **About Beth Bradley**

As one of the top professional trainers and competitors in the United States, Beth is committed to improving the lives of dogs and people through training. She teaches group classes and private lessons in basic and advanced obedience, competition dog training, puppy training, Schutzhund training, personal protection, Canine Good Citizenship, and therapy dog training.

Beth also trains and places service dogs for children with autism and custom trains "cross-trained" companion/protection dogs for families and individuals. She consults for shelters in the tri-state area and for New Jersey law enforcement on cases involving canine behavior and temperament.

Beth began studying animal behavior and dog training at age twelve. She has worked and studied under many renowned animal behaviorists and trainers. After graduating from Rutgers University with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice, Beth worked as a New Jersey State Animal Control Officer. In 1989, she founded her own company and has made dog training and consulting her full-time career since 1995. Competing with her dogs, Beth has earned national and international titles, championships, and honors in both Schutzhund and AKC Obedience. In 2003 and 2009, she represented the United States in the FCI World Trials. In 2015, Beth and her dog Fyte qualified for the elite team representing the United States at the WUSV in Finland, making Fyte the youngest qualifying dog in the history of this worldwide competition. Beth also took the Vice-championship with Fyte at the 2015 US Schutzhund Clubs of American National Championships.

Beth is the author of *Real World Dog Training*, and has produced a number of training DVDs and videos. In addition, Beth trains and handles dogs for movies, television, and theater, with recent credits including appearances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and in *Board Walk Empire*, the *Batman* franchise, *Damages*, *Blue Bloods*, *The Good Wife*, *The Blacklist*, *Billions*, and *Gotham*.

### **CONTACT BETH**

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