



DOG CARE



Nervous Dogs

Nervousness is a trait that is usually inherited from the parents of the dog. Nervous dogs need extra care when being introduced to new situations or people, as they are naturally more cautious than other dogs. It is vital that, as puppies, all dogs are correctly socialised and are exposed to situations and environments on a regular basis, but particularly nervous dogs. All of their experiences should be controlled to ensure any interaction or exposure to stimuli is positive.

This must be done with great care to ensure that the dog is not overwhelmed or scared.

When nervous, a dog may display a number of signs or behaviours; some may be very subtle and go unnoticed while others are overt.

When dogs are stressed they may lick their lips, yawn, avoid eye contact by looking away or try to escape by backing away or hiding. If you notice any of these signs, you should either remove the perceived threat or retreat to a greater distance where the dog is more confident and is willing to engage with you. By playing a game of tug or having reliable obedience commands to run through with your dog, you are able to set your dog up for success which can help them to associate the situation or stimuli with something pleasant and fun.



When these subtle behaviours are unnoticed (or ignored) the dog may then begin to cower, usually you will see them tuck their tail between the legs and their respiration rate will increase (panting).

Do not force your dog into situations like this in an attempt to “get your dog used to it”.

If an animal is continually forced into situations and unable to avoid or escape, it may resort to more intense behaviour as they can perceive that their life is in emanate danger. Some of the behaviours that dogs may display are growling, lunging forward and snapping in an attempt to remove the perceived threat, be it a real threat or not.

If this behaviour is allowed to present itself, it is important that the dog is not punished for the behaviour, this will only intensify the reaction, confirm the dogs “emotional” perception (fear) of the stimuli and or environment and the dog will learn that exhibiting aggressive behaviours is an effective response to control situations that it believes to be scary.

Punishing a frightened dog may also result in them becoming afraid of you and they may redirect their aggression onto you, e.g. biting you in defence. Preventing your dog from having to feel the need for self-protection, starts by looking out for the early signs of fearful behaviour as mentioned above.

Regardless of the breed of dog, each dog should be treated on its own merit and its responses and behaviour to the situation.

Socialisation and habituation for a nervous dog can be helped by controlling the exposure to the specific situations, whilst engaging the dog with something that it enjoys such as a game of tug, ball or food.

When desensitising a dog to any stimuli that it perceives as a threat, it is important to remember that whilst it may not be a realistic threat or danger, the dog believes it to be. Educate yourself about canine behaviour and observe your dog carefully, when the first signs of nervousness are displayed, calmly move your dog away from the stimuli until you are equipped and prepared to work on the issue correctly.

Keeping your dog in the situation with reassurances only reinforces nervousness, however by moving away, you have taken control and shown that your dog can trust you and in the future, with time and patience, the dog will learn to look to you for guidance when in stressful situations.

By having your dog understand basic obedience commands, this allows for confidence to build in the dog. By simply rewarding your dog when it complies, the dog is learning that if it displays certain behaviours, good things happen.

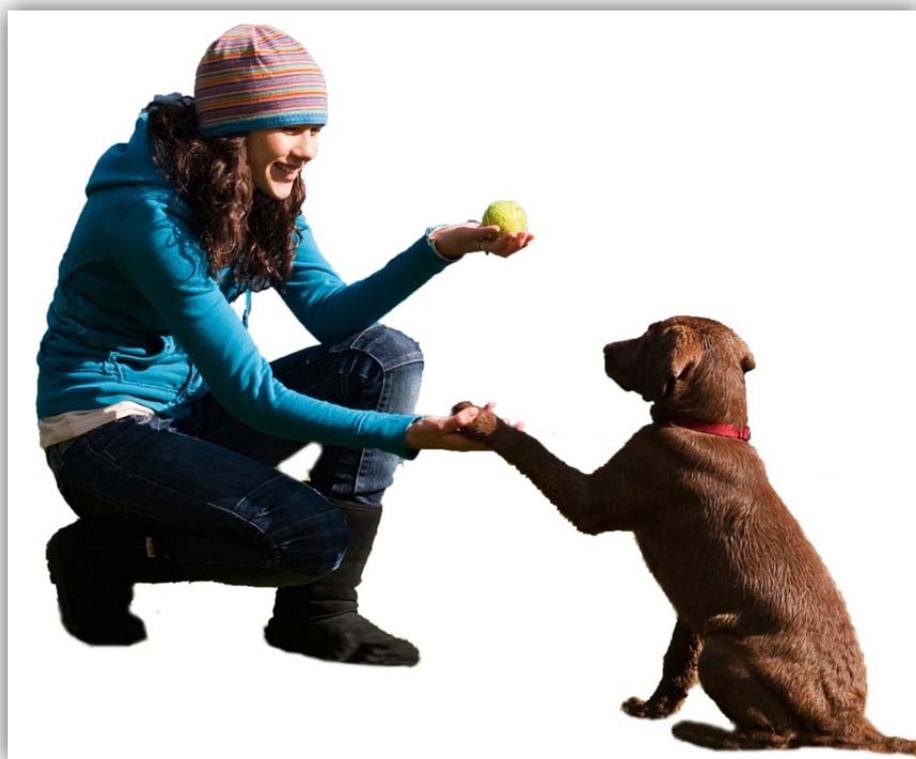
Building a dog's bank of positive behaviours can almost create default behaviours that it can display when it feels stressed e.g. sit and focus on the handler. This in effect gives the dog some control in a stressful situation; they can decide the outcome by presenting the desired "default" behaviour and be rewarded. It should be noted that the obedience commands must first be taught via the reward based method in a calm environment where the dog is relaxed and gradually expanded to include multiple environments.

Only when your dog is willing to engage with you and responds to the given command/s in multiple environments and distractions with confidence can you start the desensitisation to the perceived threat.

This process must be done gradually and the rate of progression is dictated by the individual dog in any given situation.

There are different points at which each individual dog can or will react. First a dog must be aware that the stimulus is present via observation. From this point you can determine the critical distance, this being the moment the dog starts to display the first signs of stress.

You should start the session in a fun and positive manner, well before the stimulus is present. You are aiming for the dog to have multiple successful opportunities at a distance where the dog is relaxed.



After the dog has had multiple “wins” can the stimulus then be presented at a distance to obtain the first stage of desensitisation being, observation.

Only when and if the dog maintains a happy persona and confident manner can you gradually move the dog closer to the stimulus. Desensitisation can take days, weeks and even months depending on the severity of the behaviour.

Food can be a great reward as this has a physiological effect on the dog; it decreases the cortisol levels (stress hormone) and increases the serotonin level (happy hormone) within the dog.

Should you require any further information or support please feel free to contact the Animal Aid team on 9739 0300 or email kennels@animalaid.org.au