

# FEARFULNESS AROUND STRANGERS

## WHY IS MY DOG AFRAID OF STRANGERS?

Many dogs are fearful around people they don't know well. Some people automatically assume these dogs have been abused in the past. Usually, this is NOT the case. Most of the time, if a dog fears strangers, she has simply been under-socialized to them. During the critical socialization period (from about 3 to 16 weeks of age), it is extremely important to introduce young puppies to as many unfamiliar people and places as possible, making sure that all new experiences are good ones. If a dog is 16 weeks or older and hasn't had exposure to a variety of people—of all colors, all sizes, all ages and both sexes—as she matures, she may start to display signs of fearfulness toward strangers.

Sometimes, dogs will seem fearful around specific *types* of people. Some dogs fear men but not women. Others fear children but not adults. Others fear anyone who looks different (like people wearing hats, people in wheelchairs, people with facial hair, etc.). Others fear specific racial categories or all racial categories except the one they saw during puppyhood. Again, if your dog barks at or shies away from a specific type of person, it does not necessarily mean that she's been abused. It probably means that she wasn't adequately socialized to that type of person as a youngster.

## HOW CAN I TELL WHEN MY DOG'S AFRAID?

Say you're a dog who's afraid of strangers and you encounter one. You'll probably want to increase the distance between you and the stranger in order to relieve your fear and stress. You have two options: go away yourself OR make the stranger go away. The choice you make will depend on many things, like whether or not fleeing is an option (maybe you're on leash and can't get away), your genetic programming and your previous learning experiences.

Dogs try to increase the distance between themselves and the people or things that frighten them through the use of a number of behaviors. If your dog is fearful around strangers, you may notice one or more of them when your dog encounters a person she doesn't know. Keep an eye out for the following:

### Plan A: Dog tries to go away:

- attempting to flee
- attempting to hide behind or under known people or objects

### Plan B: Dog tries to make the stranger go away:

*"I'm really nervous and afraid of you. Please don't approach or touch me right now."*

- cowering, shaking or rolling over
- becoming very still or shutting down
- staring and/or lowering of head

*"I'm extremely nervous and afraid of you! Don't come any closer! I mean it!"*

- growling and/or lip-lifting (showing teeth)
- barking and/or lunging toward stranger
- snapping and/or biting (these often occur if a dog feels trapped or is unable to get away from the stranger)

All of the above behaviors indicate extreme stress, and if you notice any of them when you and your dog are around strangers, immediately and calmly remove your dog from the situation. Keep in mind that if a dog tries Plan A and it doesn't work (the stranger doesn't move away or keeps approaching), she may readily switch to Plan B. She may also try more subtle versions of Plan B first (cowering or freezing) and then, if the stranger doesn't seem to get the message, move on to more dramatic measures (growling or snapping). Sometimes canine body language can be hard to interpret, so watch your dog very closely whenever strangers are around to avoid unexpected reactions.

### **I'VE JUST ADOPTED A DOG WHO'S AFRAID OF STRANGERS. WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO GET TO KNOW HER?**

If you've just brought home a dog who is shy or scared of people she doesn't know, be very gentle and patient at first. Keep your voice calm, soothing and friendly when you're talking to your new dog, and if she seems hesitant to approach you, try tossing some treats in her direction. When you pet her, remember to go slowly.

If you let your new shy dog approach and bond with you at her own pace, it won't be too long before she considers you her best friend, and if you've ever earned the love and trust of a shy dog, you already know that it's well worth the wait and effort.

### **WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MY DOG WITH HER FEAR OF STRANGERS?**

Living with a dog who's afraid of strangers can be challenging and requires a lot of diligence and patience on your part. But if you are careful to consistently protect your dog from stressful exposure to strangers (definitely avoid bringing her to parades, street fairs and dinner parties, for example), you can successfully manage this problem.

#### **Management**

Avoid putting your dog in situations that make her feel threatened. If strangers visit your home, you can give your dog something tasty to chew on and put her in another part of the house. If you're going somewhere and you know that you'll see strangers there, leave your dog at home. (She'll be much happier.) When out and about with your dog, you will need to watch her very closely in **all** situations where she may encounter people she doesn't know. **ALWAYS** keep her on leash and under control at all times. If you and your dog run into one or more strangers *unexpectedly*, stay calm. If *you* suddenly seem nervous, your dog will definitely notice and become nervous too. Use treats and a gentle voice to lead your dog away from the area. **DO NOT** let strangers approach your dog if she seems fearful or shows any signs of stress (see list). In fact, it's a good rule of thumb to avoid letting strangers approach your dog in general. Instead, always let HER approach THEM.

#### **Behavior Modification**

First and foremost, avoid any kind of coercive training techniques, like "correcting," punishing or yelling at your dog if she barks, growls or tries to run away from strangers. If you punish or frighten your dog, you'll almost certainly worsen the problem. (Your dog will learn that she has a **NEW** reason to fear strangers, since every time they show up, *you* suddenly get upset and angry!) The proper way to address your dog's fearful behavior around strangers involves the use of a desensitization and counterconditioning program. A good training plan involves letting your dog see strangers at a distance—the distance at which your dog is not at all nervous or frightened (possibly a *great* distance at first). Right after the strangers appear, start doling out extremely tasty treats. When they disappear, the goodies stop coming. With repetition, you can help your dog learn that people she doesn't know aren't as scary as she thought. They're far enough away to make her comfortable, and they always predict delicious goodies! Gradually, you can decrease the distance between your dog and the strangers, always making sure that she does not become frightened or stressed. If she does, you've gone too fast. Increase the distance again for a while.

## HOW DO I INTRODUCE MY DOG TO NEW PEOPLE?

If your dog is extremely afraid of strangers or barks/growls/lunges when she sees them, you'll probably need to do some training (like the kind mentioned above) before actually introducing her to new people, or avoid introducing her to new people altogether. If your dog just seems a little shy around strangers and you feel she may be ready to meet a new friend, you'll need to proceed with patience and caution. Here are some important tips:

- It's a good idea to spend some time with your dog and her "new friend" in a room. Just hang out and talk for a while, and instruct the new person to ignore your dog. That way, she can get used to the new person's presence.
- *Always* let your dog approach someone she doesn't know on her own, rather than the other way around. If she doesn't approach the new person in a friendly, relaxed manner, she's not ready to interact.
- Advise the new person to act as you did when you were first getting to know your dog. Ask him or her to use a soft, calm voice and keep body movements slow and gentle.
- Ask the new person to avoid doing things that your dog may naturally find threatening, like hugging her, looming over her (squatting or sitting may be a good idea), thumping her on the side or reaching over her head to pet her.
- After your dog has become more comfortable with her new friend (she decides to approach on her own, stays near the new person, and solicits petting and attention), give him or her some tasty treats to offer your dog.
- NEVER force your dog to meet someone if she doesn't want to. If she tries to retreat, let her do so.

## HELPFUL RESOURCES & RECOMMENDED READING

An experienced professional dog trainer can guide you through a well-planned training program to manage and modify your dog's fearful behavior around strangers. Call our **Behavior Helpline** if you'd like a referral to a local trainer who can help or if you need additional advice: **804-643-SPCA**. We can also offer a private consultation with a Richmond SPCA trainer if you need one-on-one coaching. For detailed, well-written information about helping your dog, we recommend purchasing Patricia McConnell's *Cautious Canine*, which you can find in our Lora Robins gift shop.