

## **No More Tails Between Legs: How To Deal With a Fearful/Timid Dog**

Does Gracie avoid stepping on sewer grates? Does Raquel jump out of her own skin when you rattle a plastic bag? Is a car backfiring down the block enough to transform Charlie into a glazed and drooling mess? Certain sights, sounds, and even smells may terrify the fearful dog, creating real suffering for dog and owner. While fear of thunder and fireworks are among the more common sound phobias, many different experiences can scare the fur off a scaredy-dog. Are you lost, at your wit's end and in need of solutions? Read on!

### **Training Suggestions**

Accentuate the positives. To train your dog into being brave and confident, be prepared to praise, praise, praise! Use an exposure-desensitization method in which you expose the dog to a very small dose of the fearful item and then praise and offer treats. For example, walk your dog on her leash near the sewer grate, but far away enough so that the dog is mildly uncomfortable but not panicked. If she manages to pass the grate without showing fear (no stopping, backing up, whining or barking), then offer big praise. Use both verbal praise and give her an enthusiastic head scratch. Repeat the exposure, walking her past again without trying to go any closer and again, if she doesn't react, offer big praise. If she does react, you are too close. Allow her to have more space between the scary item and her feet. Over a week or two of repeated successful exposures, slowly move closer to the scary object. Always praise the lack of a reaction. If the dog reacts with fear – in other words, shows signs of regression - back up your training until the dog is only mildly uncomfortable. Do a few more repeats at that level before trying to inch closer again.

Believe it or not, many dogs are frightened of plastic bags. They can blow in the wind, moving in erratic or unpredictable ways, and they make crinkly noises. For some dogs, that's enough! Begin your training out of this fear slowly, by petting and praising Porter while you slowly pull a plastic bag out of a coat pocket or from up your sleeve. That's it, just minimal exposure with maximum praise. After a few successes at this level of challenge, crinkle the bag a little as you set it down. Again, offer the dog big praise for tolerating this without freaking out. Once some small success has been achieved, you can start to do things like hiding a treat in the bag, or slip the bag over your hand and pet Porter with it. Always back off if your dog seems stressed. For most dogs, the scariest thing you can do with a plastic bag is to shake it out to open it up. Save that for last, and take your time, making sure that just plain being near the bag is tolerated before you start swinging it around or snapping it open.

Some dogs get frightened in situations where there is a lot of noise, stimulation and people (a crowded farmer's market, for example). In these cases, you want Percy to focus on you, since you are his person and if you are calm and happy, he will eventually trust that he can be too. Again, walk him in the general area, and praise him like crazy when he doesn't react to the other people. If this is too difficult either logistically or

emotionally, then set up a training exercise with friends or acquaintances where just a few people loiter and mill around in your backyard or driveway, ignoring the dog but scaring him simply by being there. Then walk the dog near the people, praising like crazy for any lack of reactions on his part.

### **Choices in Training Methods**

Some people prefer to use clickers or food treats when praising their brave dogs. These methods work well too. In fact, some dogs are less motivated by verbal praise or a pat on the head, but will do anything for a tasty morsel. Use high value treats, such as cheese, chicken, or other strongly flavored rich items that you can hold easily and dole out quickly. Then use the treats to keep Patches focusing on you and distracted from the scary situation. Use verbal praise along with the treats, and see how it goes. You may be able to wean her off the treats after a few exposures.

### **Lifestyling Your Training**

Integrate your confidence training into an all-around lifestyle approach. Be ready to turn any moment into a training opportunity. For example, when cooking dinner, let your dog smell the handle of the blender if she seems worried about the noise it made. Don't shut the dogs in the bathroom while you vacuum, but let them try being nearby. Whenever you see that cocked head or tucked tail, offer your dog the opportunity to grow through their fear into brave and confident dogs.

### **A Few Don'ts**

Don't hit or in any other way punish a fearful dog for refusing to cooperate out of fear. It definitely won't help and it might make matters worse.

Don't laugh when your dog seems frightened, no matter how cute or funny it might appear to be. This could be misinterpreted as praise.

Don't force the dog to do anything he or she is terrified of doing. Don't drag a frightened dog over the sewer grate or shove a plastic bag in her face. Don't throw the water-phobic dog into the pool.

Don't get discouraged if the training goes slowly. Be patient and be positive, and your dog will respond eventually.