

Overcoming Shyness



Shyness is the kind of problem that causes a dog at least as much distress as his owner. If the light of your life steals a steak now and then, sits on your couch with muddy feet or hogs the bed, the only pain he'll feel is the pain you may inflict on him for stepping over the line. But a shy dog, like a shy person, is in pain much of the time. He senses danger lurking everywhere. He fears shadows, quick movements, strangers. A sudden noise may send him fleeing to another room, bolting right out of his collar on a busy street or begin a gruesome half hour of non-stop shaking. He is often thinner than he should be, burning off calories by the hundreds when he is fearful, picking at his food, losing his appetite because a spoon drops a few feet away.

He is not only robbed of his

moments of glory in the show ring, but he misses out on all the cooing, petting and friendships that most dogs thrive on, as well as the subsequent relaxation that this physical contact provides. He may hide when guests enter your home. Or he may be fine in familiar territory but unequipped to face the rigors of the street --- passing traffic kids on bikes, strangers walking by. Sometimes, he seems fine with people but will "freak" at the sight of another dog or any other animal. His appearance is not one of confidence and canine self esteem. He suffers when there is no cause. He slinks, bolts, hangs his belly close to the ground, tucks his tail. He is useless as a natural protector of home and hearth. He should not be bred. And if the problem is neglected, he may, one day, bite in his imaginary

need for self defense.

Timidity Troubles

A shyness problem may arise from insufficient socialization early in a dog's life. Perhaps, as a puppy, he was left with the litter too long. He may have been one of the more submissive dogs in the group and he may have been jumped on, terrorized, or beaten too many times. The whole world, it may seem, is made up of enemies. He has no basis for feeling confident. In some cases, human contact was neglected for too long and the dog will be shy of people.

He may have been sent to his new home too young and not have learned from his mother and his litter mates how to fight for himself, how to toe the mark, how to stand up, when to back down. He has not learned how to find a place for himself that is comfortable, safe and appropriate. Or his shyness may be caused by poor breeding. Perhaps a nervous bitch was bred anyway for her great coat, good head or fabulous pedigree. He may be genetically programmed to be shy or he may even have learned to be fearful at his mother's knee.

Overly Protected

In some cases, while breeding was sound and early socialization sufficient, once in his new home, he was isolated from exposure to the world. He lives, perhaps, with one person, is "rich" enough to have a large, fenced yard, and he never gets to go exploring, meet new people, face up to the challenges of modern life---machines, cars, noise, crowds. Unaccustomed to change, he learns to fear anything unfamiliar.

Shyness is also increased, at times, by a well meaning owner who comforts a shy dog with ten-

derness, love and what he assumes to be understanding. He removes all causes for fear rather than aiding the dog to get used to what frightens him. Furthermore, when the dog does get frightened, he is reassured with soft words and petting. In the dog's eyes, he is getting praised for acting fearful. Thus, the problem gets compounded, even with the best of intentions.

It can be very helpful to have a detailed history of any dog with any problem. In this way, you may have one or several specifics to work with and help the dog overcome. Though a lack of information will make for more guesswork, any shy dog can be helped. Expectations should be realistic --- one cannot count on turning a basket-case into Best in Show, nor even make him suitable for breeding --- but with reasonable goals, progress can be visible and highly satisfying, insuring a far less painful existence for your pet and possibly overcoming the difficulty entirely.

While it is true that tender, loving care is important for a shy dog, love by itself is not the answer. Love and praise must come for positive actions on the part of the dog. The goal is then to determine when "love" is constructive and can help the dog.

Link of Confidence

An important first step in aiding a shy dog is to accustom him to a collar and leash. A leather collar is preferable, in this case, to a choke chain. Once used to the limitations he has while on leash, he will begin to gain confidence from the control and structure you will begin to provide. And your own confidence will travel down this "umbilical cord" right to the dog. Gradually, via use of the leash and training, you can help him to face up to the things that cause fear. He will learn to stand his ground in the face of abject panic --- and, furthermore, he will be praised for doing it. Little by little, he'll learn that he *can* cope with a noisy child, a passing bus, a dropped dish; that it's not that hard after all and that he earns your praise in the bargain. Not a bad

deal.

A simple Sit Stay is an essential tool for working with a shy dog. Once he can execute this command in the protected quiet of your living room, you can begin to teach him to face adversity by demanding he hold his ground rather than fleeing.

Cybil's Charging Personality

Cybil, a German Shepherd bitch, would run and hide when anyone came to her owner's front door. Making friends with her the first time took ages. It was accomplished with the use of the training leash and lots of patience and tenderness. A Sit Stay, with the leash in the hands of a stranger, showed Cybil that she literally would not die sitting six feet away from someone she feared. Going beyond that first step on the first session might be impossible, depending on the degree of shyness the dog exhibits. A shy dog must be pushed slowly and never cornered or overwhelmed.

After a week of practice with her owner, Cybil became rather proud of her accomplishment and relished the praise for a job well done. On the second lesson, Cybil once again attempted to hide but was brought back on leash and put on a Sit Stay. This time I was able to pet her when it was time for praise. When she tried to bolt, she was corrected with "No --- Sit Stay" and then petted very gently and verbally praised as well.

Eventually, we worked outdoors and taught Cybil to heel. While terrified of everything at first, she came to see that walking close to the side of the person holding the leash was a safe experience. Soon it became a pleasant experience. As training progressed and as Cybil progressed, her owner, at my request, invited some friends to lunch during a scheduled training session. We never forced Cybil to submit to handling too quickly. We did force her, via the Sit Stay, to remain in the proximity of strangers, something she was unable to do before training. Eventually, a young girl from the neighborhood was hired to walk and work Cybil once or twice

a week. She began to take her into the shopping area and even into stores, always correcting Cybil's expression of fear with a verbal correction and always insisting she work. Cybil was loved and praised warmly for all new experience and was treated with patience, tenderness and a respect for her difficulties. By termination of training, Cybil was greeting people at the door, comfortable on her walks and she enjoyed the camaraderie of company, provided the group was small.

The Trauma of Tupence

Tupence, a field Setter, was bought at the age of six months after spending all her life in a kennel run, at first with her litter mates and then by herself. Her owner was well aware of the difficulties this would cause and was willing to take her anyway. Housebreaking a kennel dog could present a serious problem, but, in this case, the owner took the sensible route and purchased a crate. Early adjustment to a home setting was mixed. Tupence was superb with the family, including two young children, confused about housebreaking and got severely carsick whenever she was taken for a ride, even if the duration was under five minutes. She was ecstatic to meet strangers and showed no fear of animals. But when we began to teach her to heel and inevitably began to show her the world, her belly nearly scraped the ground. In her limited experience, she had never been exposed to traffic nor had she the day by day exposure of learning to cope with the new and unfamiliar. She could get "thrown" by anything --- and she did. We built confidence through training and gradual exposure, very limited in time at first. One must look contactfully at the animal in these circumstances and know when to push for a few more minutes and when the dog is going on "overload." Our first visit to town was brief and we chose an area where cars and people passed, but not in great numbers. Eventually, Tupence was able to test herself at the shopping center and hold

her own with shopping carts, delivery trucks and even the fascinating innards of the Five and Ten. Her training and exposure should go on for quite a while, but the prognosis for her life as a well balanced pet looks excellent.

Bruce's Block

Bruce, a rough Collie, showed only the typical reserve of the breed when trained as a puppy. His owner, an 82 year old widow is a retired teacher and lives rather quietly. But Bruce became the neighborhood mascot and not a day went by without some of the children coming to run him and play with him. He loved other dogs, was outgoing on walks, and passed all the "tests" of training with flying colors. He even enjoyed a birthday party with the neighborhood kids when he turned one. Shortly after that, months after his training, I received a distress call from his owner.

What had happened, it seemed, was that Bruce hung all his fears on one hook --- the kitchen. He continued to be social with people and animals, continued to love his walks and an occasional excursion to the shopping street. But if a sudden noise emanated from the kitchen, he'd run to the front door and, huddled in a corner, he'd tremble for a good fifteen minutes.

While questioning Bruce's owner about the details of circumstances which caused him to run away and tremble and what her follow up was, I learned that when Bruce became frightened, Mary got

very upset and rushed to comfort him. Thus reinforced, his fear grew. We took Bruce into the kitchen, dropped a spoon and he took off. I found him huddled near the front door, shaking. Snapping on the leash, I took him back to the kitchen, put him on a Sit Stay and let him sniff the offending spoon. At first, he tried to run. But I insisted on the Stay. When he sniffed the spoon, I fussed over him and petted him. Then I dropped the spoon right in front of him. When he broke and tried to escape, I firmly told him "NO and made him sit and stay. Again, I let him sniff the spoon and I praised him warmly. He began to like the "game."

We experimented with various kitchen noises, none of which his gentle owner made with any frequency.

Mary said that Bruce would sometimes come in when she had dinner, but wouldn't come close enough to be touched and that he would run off at the slightest noise, like setting her cup back on to the saucer. I encouraged her to keep him in the kitchen, on leash, whenever she was there, and to intentionally make noise with silverware and dishes, occasionally even dropping something onto the floor. We continued to work with Bruce, always preventing his escape and praising his new boldness. We began to clap for him the second the noise was made and, even though we felt a little silly, it was soon clear that all the cheering was having a fast, positive effect. Bruce lay down and soon we were able to toss the spoon

to the floor behind his back and get a wagging tail instead of a disappearing act.

The key factors with Bruce were: 1. stopping praise for fear 2. forcing him to hold his ground 3. praise for bravery. The big ham seemed more moved by applause than by fear. On a follow-up phone call, Mary reported that Bruce was voluntarily joining her for all her meals and clean-up chores. If he did occasionally bolt, Mary would get him, put him on leash and bring him back to the kitchen. He seemed very willing to stay the second time around.

In all three cases of shyness, the owners were committed, willing, patient and loving. None of the three considered giving up. All three followed suggestions and worked firmly but tenderly with the dogs. All three shy dogs progressed well enough so that they could be considered good pet dogs and will be able to live out normal lives in loving homes. Even a dog of show quality with shy tendencies can be seasoned through training, appropriate praise, exposure and applause to take his place in history and stand up to the distractions, confusion and noise of the show ring. Many of the techniques used can easily be applied to other shy dogs to help them and their worried owners overcome a painful and difficult problem.

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