



Shy Dogs

**By Sue Myles
Companion Dogs**

Shy dogs can be helped. Working with them requires a different outlook as well as different techniques.

Observe your dog closely without interrupting him. What does he do with his ears, tail, eyes, mouth and body tension when he sees a new person? When someone walks past the yard? Around children? Other dogs? The better you can "read" your dog's body language, the better able you are to accurately interpret your dog's behavior.

Sit with your family and sort out the difficult events of your dog's life. If the dog had trouble with new people, were they men, women, children, men with beards, someone carrying a briefcase, wearing reflective sunglasses or a hat? Were the incidents in the house, and, if so, where exactly? In a doorway, the living room, by the sliding glass door, just as they stepped toward you? The more specific you are, the better able we are to help.

What was the person doing when the dog had trouble? Looking at the dog, reaching a hand out to pet the dog, reaching out a hand to have the dog smell the hand, talking to the dog, standing or sitting near you, bending over the dog? These "small" details are huge details to a dog and we need to pay attention to them.

Typical Trouble Spots

- Being hugged. Hugging dogs cuts off their escape route and brings them into close facial contact. Many dogs get nervous and tense. Never allow this to happen with new people, some dogs cannot tolerate it from their families.
- Close facial contact. Bringing your face next to a dog's can be bad news, especially if the dog is nervous or worried. Dogs may snap or bite defensively to make you back off and give them space.

- Extending a hand. New people will extend a hand to dogs to "let him get my smell". Believe me, dogs get that smell from 500 yards away. The extension will threaten the dog and make him snap defensively, back up and/or bark to threaten the person away.
- Eye contact. Even friendly, non-staring eye contact can make a shy dog nervous and defensive. Looking off to the side and not at the dog helps them relax.
- Feeling cornered. If a dog feels cornered and cannot find an escape route, they dog may snap or bite. Dogs lying on their beds with their backs against the wall may feel this way if they are stepped over, leaned over or even talked to when the person is leaning over them.
- Small room with new people/Large room with lots of people. Many shy dogs cannot tolerate crowding and they panic. They feel like you do at Nordstrom's on December 24th!
- Series of scary events one after the other. The dog's emotional and physical resources may be drained after the third new person approaches. Give the shy dog a break between episodes so he can recover.

Signals

- The "Village Idiot" look. This is the relaxed, open mouth pant of an at-ease, relaxed dog.
- A slowly wagging tail about mid-range on the dog's body. This tells you the dog is relaxed.
- Ears back or moving from a neutral position to back position. If the dog looks like a seal with pinned back ears, it often indicates fear.
- Lack of body tension. A stiff-muscled dog is tense and may be planning to fight or flee.

These signals tell you the dog is relaxed with the new person. If you don't see most of these signals, don't allow the person to come closer. Should we expect a shy dog to like all people? Absolutely not! Your dog has the right to not approach some people and the right to make the rude ones back off.

Some dogs, because as a result of improper or no socialization, will never accept men wearing hats or small children. And, your dog's sense of smell plays a HUGE role in liking people and feeling comfortable with them. Pheromones, or minute traces of odor emitted from our bodies, tell a dog volumes. Dogs can trace odors related to anxiety, drugs, food and illness. People who have been drinking are more likely to be bitten. If you are taking medications of any sort, your body odor changes and dogs may react. Shy, already suspicious dogs may back off, bark, growl or look scared. Just because you can't smell the odor on the person, doesn't mean the dog can't.

Shy dogs cannot be pushed further than they are ready to go. Working with them requires patience and a willingness to have the dog's needs come first. Just because you want the dog to approach people in a calm fashion NOW doesn't mean that the dog can.

General Rules for Shy Dogs

- If your dog is fearful, never soothe or stroke the dog or reward its fear. The dog may think you LIKE it to be fearful.
- If the dog barks or lunges at people, use a water bottle or beanbag correction. Never jerk a choke chain or yell at the dog. These techniques make the fear worse.
- Ask people to stop moving forward. If they won't stop a few feet from the dog and insist on petting the dog, tell them the dog has a contagious skin condition.
- If the dog looks nervous, get the dog moving. Do a series of sits, heelings or stays to get the dog focused on something familiar that the dog enjoys.
- Food rewards have to be better than normal. Cheese, chicken or dried liver are great reinforcers.

Shy dogs are not fragile dogs that need to be pitied or babied. They are misunderstood pets that need special help. To help your dog learn basic house manners and become more confident as you learn to understand, train and handle the dog, contact: Sue Myles, Companion Dogs.