

Pet Care Advice

Nervous Behaviour

A nervous or fearful reaction by a dog to an unfamiliar sight or situation can be regarded as normal canine behaviour, as long as the dog recovers from the fear quickly and learns from its experience. Most dogs will “startle” on occasions, and puppies in particular may go through a “nervous” period during adolescence, where a previously confident puppy starts to back off and show signs of anxiety when introduced to, for example, unfamiliar people or dogs. If handled correctly during this period, most dogs will go on to become confident adults. Occasionally however, a dog may become over reactive in new situations, seeming unable to cope with and recover from that fear. In this case, it is very easy for the problem to escalate until the dog’s behaviour becomes so extreme as to be classed as phobic, and the response becomes linked not just to the original fear-provoking occurrence, but generalised to more and more other “normal” situations.

Factors influencing nervousness

To avoid nervous behaviour from becoming extreme, or persisting into adulthood, it is important to understand why the behaviour occurs, and to handle the anxious puppy correctly.

Inherited factors

Puppies from nervous parents may have a predisposition to nervous behaviour in a way that those from confident, outgoing parents do not. Heredity certainly has an influence on many other canine behaviours and cannot be ruled out as a contributing factor in nervousness.



Learned behaviour

Puppies learn from their early experiences within the litter, and if they are reared by a nervous, over reactive mother, they will already have learned to react nervously themselves by the time they move to their new homes.

Early socialisation

Puppies exposed to many varying stimuli while young learn to cope easily with new things and will take most things in their stride. The ideal place to rear a litter of puppies is in the house where things like the vacuum cleaner, washing machine, cats, children etc. are just a part of life. The puppy who has been isolated in a kennel during its early weeks is unlikely to have learned to cope with new experiences and will be more likely to be nervous as a result.

Puppies also need to be exposed to as many new sights and sounds as possible when they move into their new home at around 8 weeks old - if they are confined to the house during this crucial 8-12wks socialisation phase they may tend to be nervous as a result. Socialisation at this age is sometimes neglected, as advice to get the puppy out and about is in apparent contradiction to vaccination regimes where the puppy must not come into contact with possible sources of infection until well after the course is completed. Protection from infection is important, but socialisation is equally important (a sort of “behavioural vaccination”). For this reason, we use a vaccine that provides full immunity 2 weeks after the second injection, which can be given at 10 weeks.

This enables the puppy to start going for walks at 12 weeks old. All socialisation should be positive for the dog/puppy.

Meanwhile, we recommend taking the pup out as much as possible in the car and although pavement walking should be avoided he/she can be carried around and introduced to people etc. during this 8-12 week period.

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Signs of Nervousness

There are three stages of nervous behaviour. The first is showing the whites of their eyes, turning their head away, lip smacking/yawning, pinning their ears back and pacing. The second stage is cowering down, shaking, panting, salivation, freezing on the spot, tucking the tail up high between the back legs, defecation and whining. The third stage is growling, snarling and snapping or lunging to bite.

Dealing with Nervousness

- Dogs or puppies should not be punished for any displays of nervous behaviour. Puppies go through what we call fear periods and on average will go through four of these whilst growing up, they happen at approximately around 8-10 weeks then 4-6 months then around 9 months and then finally around 14-18 months old. These times are vital and very important for a puppies development, if handles incorrectly you may end up with a nervous and fearful dog which may lead to aggression problems later on.

- Do not force the dog/puppy to confront whatever it is that he is afraid of. This will only serve to panic him and will worsen the problem.

- Give him a slack lead and allow him to retreat if that is what he wants.

- Be passive yourself. If it is a person who frightens him, engage that person in conversation. Ask them to avoid eye contact and to ignore the puppy completely. With all attention off him, he will pluck up courage to investigate in his own time. When he has come up for a sniff and is starting to relax, reward with quiet praise or a titbit. In this way, you are rewarding his recovery from fear, and he will gradually learn in a positive way with each new encounter.

- If the dog shows aggression when nervous, avoid tightening the lead when you see something you expect him to react to - a tight lead makes a nervous dog worse, for two reasons:

Firstly, it makes the dog feel he can't get away, and in the dog's mind the best form of defence if you can't escape is to attack.

Secondly, it makes him feel that you are there to back him up. In other words, his bluff won't be called. He knows you are not actually going to allow him to make contact with the thing, person or dog he is threatening and this gives him confidence to behave aggressively in order to chase the threat away (the LAST thing he actually wants is a confrontation). By keeping the lead slack you are both making the dog feel less restricted, and letting him know he is on his own and therefore it is not a good idea to give the impression he is ready for a fight.

Typically, nervous aggressive dogs are often perfectly well behaved when off the lead - this is because they are able to avoid and approach the thing (usually a person or dog) making them nervous in their own time.

Take some titbits or a favourite toy with you when you go out, to use as distraction and reward for overcoming nervousness. Always be ready and able to reward good behaviour.

-Expose the dog to lots of different sights and sounds in a controlled way to socialise and **accustom him to a wide variety of non-threatening situations**. Arrange to meet people and calm, friendly dogs for walks and training sessions.

This leaflet provides tips to help with nervous behaviour in dogs but we would always recommend that owners seek further guidance through a qualified pet behaviourist.