

7 Things You Should Never, Ever Do with a Shy Dog

Shy dogs need special care and love to feel safe. These seven things could be like torture to a pup who may have been abused, or the victim of improper socialization or a traumatic event. Take these five steps today to create an environment to help her feel safe.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If your dog is on the shy, timid side, she may have had improper socialization as a puppy, she may have endured a traumatic event or abuse, or she may have a genetic predisposition to the trait
- Shy dogs typically display certain behaviors and body language, including cowering, shaking, hiding and avoiding eye contact
- There are several things you should avoid subjecting your shy dog to, such as tying him outside a public place while you go inside and forcing him to interact with people, other dogs or in situations that make him fearful
- It's important to create a home environment for your shy dog that makes her feel safe and provides opportunities to build her confidence
- It's also important to take steps to proactively manage your dog's stress

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If your dog is more like a wallflower than the belle of the ball, chances are she's shy. Shyness in canines is typically rooted in fear, and a dog's fear can have many causes, including:

- Insufficient or improper socialization during the first 10 weeks of life
- A traumatic event during the first 3 months of life that leaves a fear imprint
- Being injured, attacked, abused or relinquished to a shelter, especially repeatedly
- Certain medical conditions
- Genetic predisposition

Shyness Signs and Signals

Your dog's behavior and body language are tip-offs to her timidity, and can include some or all of the following signals, according to pet behaviorist Steve Duno:¹

- Ears flattened
- Panting or shaking
- Raised hackles

- Cowering
- Dilated, glassy eyes
- Fear of eye contact
- Shying away from other dogs and/or people
- Skulking, pacing, hiding or escaping
- Sneering, nipping or biting
- Tail tucked
- Whining or barking
- Submissive urination

Some dogs are only shy around people, while others display shyness only around other dogs. Still others are timid in the presence of both people and pets. In addition, many shy dogs are very reactive to storms, fireworks, traffic and other situations they perceive as threatening.

7 Things You Should NOT Do with or to Your Shy Dog

These are behaviorist Duno's don'ts for parents of shy, timid dogs:

1. **Don't** tie him outside a public place, such as a coffee shop or store, and leave him, because you'll make him a sitting duck for exposure to things he fears, and you won't be there to calm him or intervene if things go badly.
2. **Don't** force her into situations you know or suspect she fears as a method of desensitizing her. It won't work, and it will only make things worse.
3. **Don't** ask other people to make eye contact with your dog, or reach for him. Instead, ask them to wait for the dog to approach them.
4. **Don't** have large groups of rowdy guests in your home (adults or kids), especially if your dog is noise-sensitive and shy around people. Putting her in a separate room or in her crate will only increase her anxiety because she'll still hear the noise, but won't be able to escape it.
5. **Don't** subject your shy dog to dominant, force-based, punitive or overbearing trainers.
6. **Don't** force a dog who is hiding out of his hiding spot. Let him come out on his own. If you must get him out for some reason, gently coax him out with a treat and immediately attach his leash.
7. **Don't** take your shy dog into noisy environments or areas with unpredictable activity, or to a fireworks display. Always think ahead and choose places you're reasonably sure won't cause her to be fearful.

Creating a Safe Home Environment for a Shy Dog

If your dog is on the shy side, it's important to set realistic goals — for her and for you. Take care not to expect an overnight change or a complete turnaround. It takes time to help a shy pet learn to look at the world differently and trust. Here are some general guidelines for creating a safe home environment for a shy pet:

- Make her feel loved and needed; communicate gently, consistently and clearly with her

- Don't force anything on her — provide her with her own safe place where she can be alone when she feels like it
- Protect her from whatever she fears
- Create opportunities for her to be successful and build confidence
- Feed her a balanced, species-appropriate diet and make sure she gets plenty of physical activity, including a minimum of 20 to 30 minutes of aerobic exercise each day, in a place and manner that ensures she feels safe

If you've rescued a shy dog or are considering adoption, it's highly recommended to try a program called A Sound Beginning, which is designed to help rescue dogs and adoptive guardians learn to communicate effectively and form an unbreakable bond. Susan Garrett's game-based learning and training program, which you can do in your own home, is also a good option. Learn more at **Recallers**.

10 Things You Can Do to Reduce Your Dog's Stress

Regardless of the triggers and root cause of your dog's shyness, all timid dogs can benefit from stress reduction.

1. Make sure he always has access to an article of clothing or blanket with your scent on it, and leave a treat-release toy for him to focus on in your absence. Place small treats around the house for him to discover, along with a few toys.
2. Add a flower essence blend from Solutions to her drinking water, and put on some soothing doggy music before you leave.
3. Invest in an Adaptil collar or diffuser for your dog. These products release a pheromone that's designed to have a calming affect on dogs.
4. Make sure your dog gets plenty of non-threatening exercise, playtime, mental stimulation and TLC. The more full her life is, the calmer she'll feel.
5. Play calm, soothing music before a possible stressor occurs. This may relax your dog and have the added bonus of drowning out distressing noises.
6. If your dog seems to respond well to pressure applied to her body, there are wraps available (e.g., Thundershirt, TTouch anxiety wrap) that many pet owners and veterinarians find extremely helpful.
7. Ttouch is a specific massage technique that can help anxious pets.
8. Consult your holistic vet about homeopathic, TCM (traditional Chinese medicine), Rescue Remedy, as well as other specific Bach flower remedies that could be helpful in alleviating your dog's stress. Products you can use, always in conjunction with behavior modification, include homeopathic aconitum (or whatever remedy fits the symptoms best), Hyland's Calms Forte or calming milk proteins (variety of brands).
9. Calming nutraceuticals and herbs that can be of benefit include holy basil, l-theanine, rhodiola, ashwagandha, GABA, 5-HTP and chamomile. Consult your holistic vet about which makes sense for your pet.
10. The essential oil of lavender has also been proven to reduce a dog's stress response. Place a few drops on your dog's collar or bedding before a stressor occurs, if possible, or diffuse the oil around your house for an overall calming effect.

It's also important to note that dogs can be quite sensitive to the effects of household electromagnetic fields (EMFs). Consider giving your dog a Wi-Fi-free zone and also a grounding mat.

Sources and References

[Paw Culture](#)

¹ [Modern Dog, December 20, 2023](#)

