



Support for adopters

INFORMATION FOR NEW DOG OWNERS

Nervous dogs

Many of the dogs that come into our care have had extremely poor starts to their lives which may lead to them displaying nervous behaviours.

Identifying Nervous Behaviour

It is important that you begin to learn to identify when your new best friend is feeling anxious. Most people will be familiar with the obvious signs, but there are many subtle signs which you can look out for and identify before your dog's anxiety progresses further.

The subtle signs of nervous or anxious behaviours are:

- Averted stare (looking away from the subject that is causing anxiety).
- Lip licking
- Yawning (when not tired)
- Panting (when not hot or thirsty)
- Avoiding the situation (moving away, possibly trying to hide)
- Pinning the ears back

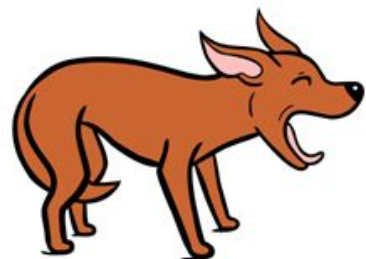


If any of these behaviours are detected then move your dog out of the situation, or if possible try to distract your dog with something fun and positive such as his/her favourite toy. Avoid reassuring your dog as this will only worsen the behaviour, your dog may think there is a reason to be nervous.

If the subtle signs of nervous behaviour go unnoticed or are ignored then these will develop into more obvious behavioural signs.

The obvious signs of nervous or anxious behaviour are:

- Cowering and lowered body position
- Tail tucked between the legs or a low tail wag
- Whites of eyes showing
- Freezing (stops as though frozen to the spot)
- Lip curling (the front part of the lip curls up)



If these behaviours are displayed the dog should be removed immediately from the situation. If your dog is on a secure lead then guide him/her away using the lead. If your

dog is loose and no lead is attached then call him/her in an upbeat positive manner and reward with a treat or praise when he/she returns to you. If your dog is showing obvious signs of nervous behaviour do not grab his/her collar, you may startle them and he/she may redirect aggression on to you.

Your dog should never be pressurised into situations that he/she is anxious and nervous of, or punished for their behaviour, otherwise the nervous behaviour will intensify and may result in them developing aggression to avoid certain situations.

Appeasing Behaviour

Sometimes when a dog feels uncomfortable and nervous around other people or dogs, they can display appeasing behaviour. This usually is performed by them very slowly, and often head/shoulder first, rolling gradually onto their back with their legs in the air with their paws limp. Often the dog will not move and will remain still in this position. In more severe cases it may urinate itself.

When a dog performs this behaviour it is quite literally trying to say to you 'please don't hurt me, I am not going to hurt you!'

Unfortunately many people miss read this behaviour and interpret it as 'please rub my belly!' By doing this you are maintaining the dog in his/her anxious state so he/she will never get better.

If your dog is displaying appeasing behaviour such as this it is best to ignore the behaviour, move away from the dog and do not talk to it. Eventually the dog will leap back to its feet and begin to behave normally and more relaxed, when the dog returns to normality this is when you give him/her lots of praise and positivity.

Improving Nervous Behaviour

There are exercises and training activities that you can do to improve a nervous dog's behaviour. This is usually done by carefully controlled exposure to certain situations and socialisation programs, but these should always be done under the guidance of a recommended dog behaviourist.

It's important that the behaviour expert used is someone with the appropriate knowledge, skills and experience to treat your dog. Anyone can call themselves a behaviour expert, but many do not possess up to date knowledge or the necessary skills required to treat pets with behaviour problems. Inappropriate or outdated advice or methods may adversely affect your dog's welfare and even make your dog's behaviour problem worse. The Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour (ASAB) accredits Certified Clinical Animal Behaviourists (CCAB), who possess the appropriate skills, knowledge and abilities. The Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors (APBC) also represents animal behaviourists. You can find out more on the RSPCA website – www.rspca.org.uk

These exercises and training activities can take a lot of patience, understanding and consistency to ensure their success.

By simply learning to read the behavioural signs of your dog, more importantly the subtle ones, and avoiding the situation before nervous behaviour develops, will help your dog to begin to learn to trust you and realise that you will not be forcing him/her into any situations they are nervous off.

Attending regular training classes will help you improve your dog's obedience and ultimately the control you will have of your dog in difficult situations. It will also put you in touch with a dog trainer that will be able to support you. Make sure that you research the dog training classes that you choose, quite often your local vet will be able to recommend a reputable dog trainer or behaviourist. Any good dog trainer will be more than happy for you to watch one of their lessons and discuss your dog's needs prior to your first class.

Your new found friend will be looking at you for protection so be prepared to look out for potential scary situations to prevent him/her from feeling nervous. Remember to have positive time for your dog with lots of fun and games.