

# **FEARS AND PHOBIAS: ANIMALS AND PEOPLE.**

## **My dog seems to be afraid of people and or other animals - why might that be?**

There are many reasons why dogs can develop a fearful reaction to people and other animals. Firstly, the dog may have had limited or minimal exposure to people and/or other animals when it was young. Socialisation is an important aspect of raising a puppy. Without adequate, constant and positive interactions with people and other animals dogs may develop fears. In fact, fears may be very specific, so that a dog that has been adequately socialised to a particular "type" of person, such as adult males, may still show fear toward children, women, teenagers, or people of other races. Similarly, dogs that are well socialised to other dogs may show fear toward other species such as cats. Secondly, dogs learn from the experiences that they have and it may take only one intense or traumatic experience for the dog to generalise that experience to many similar situations. This can occur for example with a bad experience with a small child which then makes the dog fearful of all small children, or a fight and subsequent injury from another dog which results in apprehension and fear in the presence of any other dogs. Sometimes a number of unpleasant events "paired" or associated with a person or animal can lead to increasing fear. For example, if a pet is punished when it is exposed to a person or other animal, it may begin to pair the stimulus (the person or other animal) with the unpleasant consequence (punishment). This is especially true with the use of a painful device such as a pinch or shock collar.

## **Can I prevent fears from developing?**

As mentioned above, socialisation is the cornerstone to raising a dog that is comfortable with people. Early, frequent and pleasant encounters with people of all ages and types can help prevent fears later. This exposure should begin before 3 months of age and continue throughout the first year. In addition, the dog should be exposed to as many different environments, sights and sounds as possible so that they become accustomed to an ever changing environment early, before fears emerge (Fear and phobias - noises and places).

## **What signs might my dog show when it is afraid?**

When frightened, a dog may cower, look away, tuck its tail between its legs and perhaps tremble or pant. At other times the signs may be more subtle. A dog who is very frightened may duck its head and look away when a stranger approaches to stroke it and it may tolerate stroking at first. However, if contact persists or the animal feels unable to escape there is a very real danger that it will snap. It is important to watch your dog for signs of uneasiness such as backing up, hiding behind you, licking lips and yawning. Growling, or snarling are usually well recognised as indicators of aggression, but they may also indicate fear.

## **What information do I need to identify and treat my fearful pet?**

Professional intervention by a veterinary or applied animal behaviourist is needed for dogs that are showing extreme fears especially when there is aggression. If the fears are mild, then owner intervention may help and prevent them from progressing. Firstly, it is important to identify what the fear inducing stimulus is. This is not always easy and it is important that you get it right. What people or animals is the dog afraid of and where does the fearful behaviour occur? Often there are certain situations, people, and places, which provoke the behaviour more than others.

For treatment to be most successful, it is important to be able to place the fear inducing stimuli along a gradient from low to high. In other words, you want to identify those situations, people, places and animals that are likely to cause minimal fear as well as those situations, people, places and animals that are most likely to cause a more severe response.

Next, you need to examine what factors may be reinforcing the behaviour. Some owners actually reward the fearful behaviour by reassuring their pets with vocal intonations or body contact. Aggressive displays are a successful way of getting the fearful stimulus to leave and removal of the stimulus is a very effective reinforcer of the behaviour. Any ongoing interactions that are provoking fear need to be identified. Examples might include teasing behaviours, painful interactions including the use of punishment (discussed previously), or overwhelming stimuli.

### **After I have identified the stimuli, what do I do next?**

Before a behaviour modification programme can begin, you need to be able to control and communicate with your dog. This will require some training and in many cases a head collar will be needed. Head collars allow control of the dog's head and neck to ensure that the dog responds to the given command (sit, quiet, heel).

Teach your dog that when it sits and stays it will receive a delicious food reward. The aim of this training is to allow the dog to assume a relaxed and happy body posture and facial expression on command. Once this is established, then food rewards are phased out.

Lastly, begin counter-conditioning and desensitisation to accustom the dog to the stimuli that usually cause the fearful response. This needs to be done slowly. This is where the gradient that you established earlier becomes helpful. Start by exposing the dog to very low levels of the stimulus, in fact ones that do not evoke any fear. The dog is then rewarded for sitting quietly and calmly. Gradually, if the dog exhibits no fear, the stimulus intensity is increased. It is extremely important that this is done slowly. The aim is to reward appropriate behaviour, and teach the dog how to associate the once fearful stimulus with calm relaxation and rewards. If the dog begins to show fear during training, you are progressing too fast and could be making the problem worse. Always set up the dog to succeed. The use of the lead and head collar can greatly improve the chances of success and because of the additional control, will often help the owner to succeed in getting the dog's attention and calming it down; faster than with commands and rewards alone.

### **But my dog may still encounter the fearful stimulus when we are not in a training exercise. What should I do then?**

Each time the dog experiences the fearful stimulus and reacts with fear, the behaviour is further reinforced. If possible, you should try to avoid the fear-producing stimulus during the treatment programme. This may mean confining the dog when children visit, or the house is full of strangers. Alternatively, walks may need to be curtailed or taken at times when encounters with other people and animals can be minimised.

If you do find yourself in a situation where the dog is responding fearfully, you should refrain from using reassuring vocal intonation and body contact. This does not "soothe the savage beast" but rather serves as reinforcement. As long as the dog is wearing a lead and head collar, it may be reoriented to face the owner, respond to a sit command, and learn to ignore or accept the approaching stimulus. Only if the dog cannot escape and can be made to calm down before the stimulus leaves, will the dog learn that the stimulus is not to be feared and will do no harm.