



## Confidence Building

### How to help your timid dog find courage.

There are a lot of things in our world that have the potential to frighten our dogs. You don't have to do a lot of fancy stuff to help your dog become more confident in his world. Simply teaching him basic good manners – to respond appropriately to your cues – will make his environment more predictable. It builds confidence to understand what you're asking of him, and to understand the consequences of his behavior. Of course it goes without saying that you will use positive reinforcement-based training with him so the consequences are happy ones. Nothing can destroy a timid dog's confidence faster than the application of verbal or physical punishment; this will convince him he's right to think the world is a scary and unpredictable place. Combine his positive reinforcement good manners training with structure in his routine and stability in his life and you will have taken a large step toward increasing his confidence. But of course, you want to do more to help your dog get brave. Happily, you can do that simply by doing fun stuff with him, such as:

#### The Basics

Targeting means teaching your dog to touch a designated body part to a designated target. Many dogs love targeting, partly because it's easy to do, and partly because it pays off well – “push the button (the target spot), get a treat.”

- Offer your hand, then click and treat when the dog sniffs it. Targeting is a useful exercise to teach to keep your dog happy and focused on you in the presence of a scary stimulus.
- Since dogs naturally explore the world with their noses and paws, nose and foot targeting are the two easiest. Nose-targeting draws your dog's eye-contact and attention from a worrisome stimulus to a pleasant one.
- Hold out your hand in front of your dog, at nose level or below. When he sniffs it click your clicker (or use a verbal marker, such as a mouth click or a word) and feed him a treat. Remove your hand, then offer it again. Each time he sniffs, click and treat.
- If he stops sniffing rub a little tasty treat on your palm, to make your hand smell intriguing, and try again. His “touch” behavior becomes deliberate, rather than incidental to sniffing your hand.
- When you see him deliberately bumping his nose into your hand, add the “Touch!” cue as you offer your hand to him. Encourage him with praise and high-value treats. Make it a game, so he thinks it's the most fun in the world. You want to see his eyes light up when you say “Touch,” and you want him to “bonk” his nose into your hand, hard! Start offering your hand in different places so he has to move to touch it, climb on something to touch it, jump up to touch it.

- When he loves the touch game, occasionally ask him to touch twice; tell him he's a good dog after the first one, and click and treat only the second one. Gradually decrease your rate of reinforcement, until he'll touch several times before he gets his click and treat. Then click and treat several in a row. Mix it up, so he never knows when the click will happen – but the click and treat always happen eventually!

### **Targeting as a Game!**

Now try playing touch when your dog is a little bit nervous about something. Scary man with a beard and sunglasses passing by on the sidewalk? Hold out your hand and say "Touch!" so that your dog takes his eyes – and his brain – away from the scary thing and happily bonks his nose into your hand. Click and treat. He can't be afraid of the man and happy about touching your hand at the same time. He also can't look at the target and stare at the scary man at the same time.

Ask him to touch several more times, until the man has passed, and then continue on your walk. If you do this every time he sees a scary man, he'll decide that men with beards and sunglasses are good because they make the touch game happen! By changing your dog's behavior – having him do something he loves rather than acting fearful – you can manage a scary encounter, and eventually change his emotional response to and association with something previously scary to him.

### **Find It**

Like targeting, "Find it" is a behavior many dogs learn to love, and another game you can play to change your dog's behavior in the presence of a fear-causing stimulus, eventually changing his emotional response.

- Start with your dog in front of you, and a handful of tasty treats behind your back. Say "Find it!" in a cheerful tone of voice and toss one treat a few feet to your left. When your dog gets to the treat, click just before he eats it. When he comes back to you say "Find it!" again and toss a second treat a few feet to your right. Click – and he eats the treat. Do this back and forth, until your dog is easily moving from one "find it" treat to the other. Then toss them farther each time until your dog happily runs back and forth.

Now if a scary skateboarder appears while you're walking your dog around the block on his leash, play the find it game, keeping the tossed treats close to you. Your dog will take his eyes off the scary thing and switch into happy-treat mode. You've changed his emotions by changing his behavior.

### **Emergency Escape**

An emergency escape game gives you a "run away" strategy when you know an approaching stimulus will be too much for your worried dog. However, because you've taught it to your dog as a fun game, he's not running away in panic; he's just playing one of

his favorite “get brave” games that just happens to move him farther away from the scary thing.

- Teach this game to your dog in a safe, comfortable environment when he’s not being afraid of something.
- As you are walking with him on-leash, say your “Run away!” cue, then turn around and run fast, encouraging your dog to romp with you for a squeaky toy, a ball, a handful of high value treats at the end of the run, or a rousing game of tug – whatever your dog loves most. The key to success with this exercise is convincing your dog that the “run away” cue is the predictor of wonderful fun and games. Again, you’re teaching him a new, fun behavior – “Run away!” – that you can use to change his emotional response in a scary moment.

## **Play**

You can use any behavior your dog already loves – a trick, a toy, a game, anything that lights up his face – to convince him that good things happen in the presence of something scary. If he loves to roll over, ask him to do that. If he delights in snagging tossed treats out of the air, do that.

The key to making any of these games work to help your dog be brave is to be sure you keep him far enough away from the scary thing, at first, that his brain is able to click in to “play” mode. You will always be more successful if you start the games when you see low levels of stress, rather than waiting until he’s in full meltdown.

## **Get Behind**

“Get behind” is more of a management strategy. Timid dogs often try to hide when they’re afraid.

- Have your dog in front of you, with an ample supply of small, high-value treats in your treat pouch, or in a bowl on a nearby table. Say “Get behind!” and lure your dog behind you and into a sit. Click and treat.
- Repeat several times, until he lures easily into position. Now say the cue and pause, to give him a chance to think about it and respond. If he moves even slightly, click, lure him into position, and treat. A tentative movement is sometimes a question to you – “Is this what you want?” If you answer with a hearty “Click (Yes!!)” and treat, you can move the training forward more quickly. Keep repeating the cue/pause, gradually reducing how much you lure, until he’s moving into position on his own when you give the cue.

You can start applying this strategy in real-life situations early on in the training, even if before your dog fully grasps the concept, simply by luring him into his safe position as the scary thing passes.

## **Treat and Retreat**

“Treat and retreat” is a procedure to help timid dogs get brave. To use treat and retreat, start with your dog a safe distance from a person who worries him. Have that person toss a piece of low-value kibble over your dog’s head. Your dog will turn and walk away to get the kibble, then turn back to look at the scary person. When he turns back, have the person toss a high-value treat in front of the dog, in the approximate place the dog was originally. (You may want to use some kind of marker to help your tossing-person’s aim.) Your dog’s happy association with the “run away fast” game gives you a great emergency-escape tool to use when you need to make a fast, graceful exit!

When the dog comes forward and eats the high-value treat, have the person toss another low-value treat behind the dog, then another high-value treat in the original spot. As your dog gets more relaxed about coming forward for the high-value treat, have the tosser gradually decrease the distance, so the dog is going closer to the scary person to eat the treat. If you see increased signs of reluctance with the decreased distance, you’ve decreased the distance too quickly. Go as slowly as necessary to keep your dog happy about this game; you want him moving toward the person tossing the treats happily and voluntarily.