

Never Praise FEAR - by Pet Country Trainer Jean Marcellus

Written by Brian Adam

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Previously, we discussed how dog owners can unknowingly create separation anxiety. Now we'll explore how owners of fearful dogs, can actually make matters worse - when they think they're helping!

Almost all dogs will startle or show slight fear of new things they're not used to. It could be different people, other dogs, objects or sounds. Most well-socialized dogs recover after a few seconds, become curious and want to approach & smell the the target.

The fearful dog will display a very different picture. The tail will be between the legs & curl up to touch the stomach; the hair on its back may raise, its head may lower, moving back & forth to avoid eye contact. Its mouth & whiskers may pull back to the point of showing teeth; there may be excessive licking of lips, hiding behind its owner's legs or struggling to get away. The dog will not move forward or attempt to use its nose to scent.

Why do these dogs become so fearful?

There are many reasons. Common ones are: they have been taken from their littermates too young, or not have been properly socialized at a young age with different people or other dogs. They might have a medical condition, in which their hearing or sight is compromised. They also might have had a very bad experience with the "target" of their fear.

When owners of fearful dogs see this reaction, they feel sorry for them, and want to comfort them. This over-reaction may include: petting or hugging the dog; also: picking them up, to remove them from the situation. **NOTE: THE DOG VIEWS THIS AS "PRAISE!"** When you praise your dog, chances are that this behaviour will be repeated; and so the cycle has been created, with the dog's behaviour getting worse instead of better.

How do we correct this behaviour?

Firstly, we disagree with the behaviour using a verbal cue; a growl sound, "hey", "aah" or a touch to remove the dog's focus from their target. We then move them far enough away, so they can eat a food reward. What you're rewarding is "watch me" - as opposed to the fearful state. Try the approach again very slowly. What you want, is to see the dog using their nose to get the scent of the target. This is a GOOD thing, reward or praise. Let the dog approach at their own pace; as long as they move forward, praise & reward. It may take a few seconds, a few minutes or even days. Be patient, and you'll both reap the rewards!