



Transitioning Tips for Fearful Dogs or Puppies

Fear in dogs can be rooted in past negative experiences, lack of exposure to new stimuli at a young age, genetics, or all of the above. Many fearful dogs show increased fear or stress while they transition to their new home environment. However, there are many things you can do to help your new friend to get comfortable in their new home.

COMMON SIGNS OF FEAR/STRESS

Tense body posture and/or Trembling
Hesitant to approach
Exposing belly
Hiding/retreating
Looking away (or everywhere else but you)
Noise sensitivity (flinching)
Lip Licks and/paw lifts/closed mouth
Showing whites of eyes
Not taking treats/eating food
Tail down or tucked
Barking/growling/snapping

COMMON SIGNS OF RELAXATION

Soft, blinky eyes
Loose, wiggly body
Nudging/leaning into you
Jumping onto your lap
Engaging in play
Deep breaths or sighs
Stretching/yawning
Neutral, wagging tail (not too high or low)
Open mouth
Play bows

1. **Transition space.** During their transition home, **confine your shy dog to a single, dog-proofed room** (bathroom, spare room, laundry room, etc.) to start. If introduced to the entire house at once, the dog may choose their OWN hiding space, which may be inaccessible to you (ex under a bed). In choosing a space for your shy dog, you can more easily monitor, socialize, and build your relationship during the transition. Make sure they have access to everything they need in the room (Crate/Bed/Food/Water/Toys/Potty Pads – if no access to yard).
2. **Transition time.** Give your shy dog time to decompress for **at least the first two weeks** at home. Have few or no visitors over. Refrain from adventures or long walks. Refrain from bathing them, trimming their nails, or going to the groomer during this time. Some shy dogs are at first uncomfortable with their adopters approaching to leash them up. In this case, keep your dog's harness on with leash dragging until your shy dog is soliciting touch. Make sure your dog stays in areas where the leash won't get caught (don't crate your dog with harness and leash on).
3. **When they're ready, take petting slow.** If they approach, begin with gentle chest or side pets, rather than overhead (this can be scary!). Try petting gently on the chest/side for 3-5 seconds, then retract your hands to see if they choose to re-engage with you. **Refrain from picking them up, forcing them out of a hiding spot, or restraining them from moving away.** Fearful dogs often relax more when they see that your goal is not to immediately touch them. In turn, this often leads them to allowing touch more readily.
4. **Positive associations.** Find what motivates your dog and use that to create positive associations to being around you, or in new situations. Find their favorite high-value treat (i.e. cheese, hot dog, lunch meat, etc.) or toy, then offer it to them when you are socializing or helping them explore something new. Make the association that hanging out with you = something nice happens! Even if you walk into their room, toss their favorite treat, then leave, you are helping to create positive associations.
5. **Your body language.** Sitting or crouching with your side facing a small, shy dog is typically less scary than facing them head-on, standing over them, or reaching towards them. For very shy dogs, facing away and ignoring them while you check your phone or read a book and allowing them to explore at their own pace can help them gain confidence.
6. **Decrease conflict.** Many shy dogs feel conflict around food: they may approach you to get food or treats from your hand even when they are still uncomfortable being near you. Instead of holding a treat in your hand and luring them to you, underhand-toss treats behind the dog and away from you to a distance they are comfortable retrieving them. **If they are not eating, they may be too fearful** and need more space.
7. **Never force your shy dogs into an interaction.** Coach all new people through proper shy-dog introductions. Fear can escalate to aggression, so be sure to respect your shy dog's signals and help them avoid or move away if necessary.

For more information and behavioral support, contact our behavior department at www.eastbayspca.org/behaviorhelp