

Treat Retreat: A Training Game for Fearful Dogs and Puppies

We often recommend using food to help a dog who is uncomfortable around people gain confidence. But HOW you use the food can mean the difference between a successful and unsuccessful (potentially unsafe!) interaction.

It can feel intuitive to offer the dog food out of your hand, such as in the illustration below:

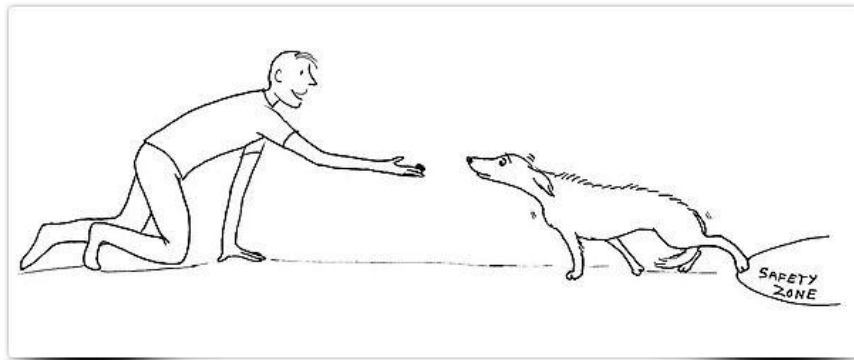


Figure 1 Credit: [Diamondsintheruff.com](https://www.diamondsintheruff.com)

The trouble is, many dogs are so food motivated that they will push past their fear in order to obtain the food. This puts them in a heightened state of fear while being close to you, **INCREASING** the risk for bites!

Instead, we recommend using the “Treat Retreat” protocol.

1. **Use high value food!** Make sure you have something extra tasty, like small pieces of hot dog, cheese, lunch meat, liver, etc.
2. **Adjust your body language.** Make sure you are not standing over the dog, and that you are “side face,” or “shoulder to the dog” rather than facing them squarely. Avoid direct prolonged eye contact. Relaxing your shoulders, tilting your head to the side, and speaking gently in a “baby voice” can all make a big difference!
3. **Start at a distance away from the dog.** For more fearful dogs, we want to be far enough away that they are alert but not terrified.

For more information or to request behavior assistance, visit eastbayspca.org/behavior.

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4. **If the dog is comfortable enough to investigate you, IGNORE THEM!** Some timid dogs feel comfortable enough to come up and sniff you. This is not the time to reach for them! Instead:
5. **Toss the treat BEHIND the dog,** so that they must move AWAY from you to go get it. Try to do this underhand rather than overhand.
6. **Repeat!** If the dog does not immediately re-approach, that's fine. Continue tossing food in such a way so that they must create distance between the two of you to get it. Aim for at least 5-10 tosses in a session, multiple times a day.
7. **Once they've got the hang of it, generalize!** You want to practice this in many situations. Is the dog lying down? Every time you pass, you can play treat retreat and then leave their space. Play it in the yard, in different rooms in the house, in different situations and at different times.
8. **Look for more relaxed body language!** Higher tail carriage, soft eyes, yawning, stretching, loose body, wagging, shaking off (as though wet) are all great indications that a dog is becoming more comfortable. Once they are CONSISTENTLY choosing to stay close enough to you to touch (3-5 sessions in a row), THEN begin offering treats out of your hand.
9. **Begin offering brief, gentle touch.** Best practices are UNDERHAND, on the neck and chest area. We strongly recommend using only brief touch at first, and practicing Consent Checks throughout the interaction (See our *Consent Checks* handout). If this startles the dog or they move away, go back to Step 6.
10. **Use Treat Retreat for any new introductions.** This is a great way for dogs to meet potentially scary strangers! Instruct any friends, family members or acquaintances to begin by ignoring and tossing treats.