



BUILDING CONFIDENCE BUILDING COURAGE



Imagine going through life so fearful that it is nearly impossible for you to meet new people, go to unfamiliar places or try unique experiences. Your fears keep you from making friends or taking a new job. Timid and fearful dogs lead lives just like that. Walks in the park are not the enjoyable excursions that other dogs take; they are tension filled, fear inducing marches. Visiting friends, thunder and even the sounds of nearby children can all be traumatic for the fearful dog. It is really not surprising that fearful dogs learn quickly that aggression is a good coping tool to avoid the stress of meeting unfamiliar dogs or people. To further compound the problem, it is not uncommon for some dogs to be banished to the yard or house for a lifetime devoid of interaction with the outside world. This serves to deepen the dog's fears and sometimes increase the level of aggression.

What you need is a way to boost your dog's confidence level and lower her fearful reactions to new people, places and things. Building your dog's confidence level will help her to remain calm (or at least calmer) in situations that have traditionally caused her fear. Her increased confidence can even help her to remain steady while meeting new dogs or people.

Here are five great ways to help your dog gain the confidence she needs:

- 1) **Basic Obedience** – Obedience training is a great confidence booster for shy dogs, fearful dogs, young dogs, newly adopted dogs, in short for just about every dog. A fearful dog can learn to accept her handler as leader, which helps her to relax. Conquering obedience skills will help her to feel capable.
- 2) **Out of Sight Stay** – Fearful dogs are often very attached to their owners, often to the point of being dependent on them for shelter and solace from the outside world. This is why the out-of-sight stay can be so challenging. Staying in a room all by yourself, without your psychological crutch can be a nerve racking experience. However, practice with this important skill will teach the fearful dog that she can survive your absence and be just a bit independent. Begin by putting your dog in a sit stay about ten feet from a corner around which you can “disappear.” Maintain the stay hand signal as you walk around the corner but keep the hand signal visible. Wait only a few seconds before releasing her. Work at this level until your dog can confidently maintain her stay for 30 seconds or more; then practice as

above but pull your hand out of sight. From this point, you can increase the difficulty by asking her to maintain the stay for longer periods, going out of the front door, and even knocking on the door once out of sight. Each increase in difficulty will build a corresponding increase in confidence in your dog.

3) **Check It Out** – As simple as this command is, it can have an amazing effect over time. I am sure that you have seen your dog retreat from many unusual and not so unusual things in the past. When you see this reaction the next time – stop; this is an opportunity to teach your dog to be brave and “check it out.” Reach in your pocket for a treat and act curious about the “spooky” thing. Then tell your dog to check it out. If she takes even one tentative step in the right direction, reward her and make a fuss. Ask her to check it out again. She may make another step toward the object, she may walk all the way up to it to smell it and she might decide to retreat. Do not push her; she will advance at whatever rate she is capable of. Reward her for any move in the right direction and ignore the lack of bravery. By using this command faithfully and never pushing too hard or too fast, your dog will learn that she is always safe when she hears the words “check it out.” Sooner or later, you will find that your dog has new courage in formerly stressful situations.

4) **Bang (you're dead)** – To the fearful dog, laying down and exposing her belly on command is a frightening thing. Even dogs that are very comfortable rolling onto their backs for their family members can find that doing the same thing under command is a bit tough. So, let's build her confidence by letting her know that she can trust her family (and later, others) enough to put herself in this compromising position. To begin training this trick, start with your dog in the down position. Make a “gun” with your right hand and quietly give the command “bang.” Put your “gun” fingers to her shoulder and gently press until she rolls onto her side. You want your dog to remain still for about three seconds before releasing her by pulling up your signal hand and saying O.K. It may be necessary to flatten your hand and hold her in position for a while until she gets the idea. Your dog may be fearful of rolling onto her side at first. If all you can accomplish at first is a partial roll, reward that and rub her belly for a while. Hopefully she will become more confident with practice. Once your dog is quite comfortable performing bang for you and your family, it is time to see if she will perform in front of your friends. This will be a big leap in confidence for her, so don't be surprised if she is a bit wary at first. After a few repetitions where she finds that she is the “hit of the party” with her new trick, she most likely will decide bang works out pretty well for her. Last but not least, get your friends to do the trick with her. It takes real courage for your dog to perform at this level, but think of the progress she will have made.

5) **Roll Over** – Roll over is just an extension of the skills and confidence it takes to do bang. You will use a lure (a tasty treat) to get your dog to twist her body around and roll over. Begin with your dog in the down position again. Put a treat between your fingers so that she can smell it and chew at it a bit and put the treat right under her nose. Rotate the treat from her nose to her shoulder while getting her to follow it. Your dog should easily go from the down position to laying on her side. Continue to pull the treat slowly from her shoulder to her back as she follows. The idea is to entice her into the twisting motion necessary to perform a roll over. You may need to help her finish off the roll over at first, but she should get the idea pretty quickly.

These five exercises are very valuable in building confidence in your dog but an added bonus is that they are all fun and challenging. Also, you will find that the benefits can go beyond the confidence building they are intended to accomplish. You might find that your children want to become more involved since the trick training is fun to show off to their friends. You will probably also notice a stronger bond with your dog and an improved ability to communicate with her. Please work hard at these exercises but remember to acknowledge and celebrate the small accomplishments along the way.

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