ANXIOUS PUPPIES

New research shows anxious, timid puppies often become anxious, fearful adult dogs, and are more prone to separation anxiety, social anxiety and even fear-related aggressive behavior. Shyness is an inherited trait which can be made better or worse depending on how a puppy is raised and trained. The sooner we know a puppy is anxious or fearful the more we can do to keep shyness from becoming a much more serious problem.

When a puppy first visits the veterinarian at 8-16 weeks of age, 90% of the time we will see the following behaviors:

- It will be actively exploring the exam room
- It will be silent and it won't be panting or whining
- It will ignore the veterinarian for the most part and will be passive for the examination
- Its ears will be in a normal position – not flat back in submission
- There will be no yawning or lip licking, both of which are signs of anxiety
- The whites of the eyes won't be visible
- It will happily take treats

Anything that deviates from this normal pattern is cause for concern.

Our own human behavior and responses can make anxiety worse. It is instinctive for us to hold and cuddle a child or a pet who is frightened. What works better is rewarding calm, relaxed behavior. It is difficult to train yourself to reward a puppy who is being brave but it's very helpful to do so.
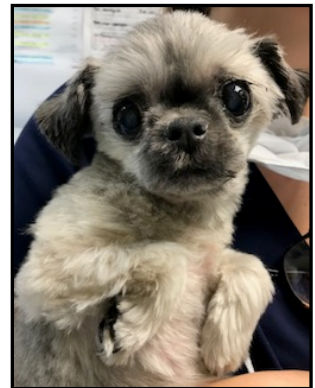
To do this, praise or give a treat whenever your puppy is exploring its surroundings or new people. If you take 50 kibbles of puppy food and toss a nugget every time you notice your pup is calm and relaxed, continuously throughout the day, you can help a young dog to reduce its fear and reactivity. You can feed the entire day's worth of food this way if needed.

Fear aggression in young puppies is especially problematic. Puppies who are already trying to bite strangers at 2-4 months of age usually grow up to be dangerous dogs. Normal puppies don't growl, snap at or bite people.

Socialize your puppy as much as possible. This means exposing the puppy to as many people and experiences as possible, with lots of praise and rewards. Resist the urge to keep your

puppy at home! Young puppies should meet 100 new people during the first few months of life.

Keep to a regular, predictable schedule as much as possible. Even changing the puppy's feeding schedule on the weekends can make him or her more anxious. Just as with young children, stability and routine are helpful.

Provide lots of play and mental stimulation – this usually means a puppy socialization class, and obedience class when the puppy gets a little older. This will help you to learn to be consistent with praise and corrections, and gets the puppy more exposure to different people and pets. Consistency is important because puppies, like children, get confused and worried when they are unsure what to expect. In other words, if you ignore him getting on the furniture or jumping up some of the time but correct him at other times he won't know what he's supposed to do or not do. It's especially detrimental to mental health if every member of the family enforces different rules!

Training should be reward-based. Punishment worsens fear and anxiety and impairs learning. Nervous dogs should never be trained with choke chains, prong collars or a raised voice. We strongly recommend that you read behaviorist Patricia McConnell's booklet *The Cautious Canine* (about $6) if your pup is on the timid side.

Do not be afraid to try antianxiety medication. Studies show that starting a fearful puppy on fluoxetine (Prozac) at an early age changes brain development for the better. Instead of growing more and more fearful, they go the other way as the brain develops, becoming less anxious and more normal.

We have lots of additional resources that can help with all kinds of behavioral issues – handouts, videos, etc. We can also refer you to good classes, trainers and behavioral specialists. Don't hesitate to ask for help or advice if you need it. Puppyhood doesn't last long, so it's important to act early when difficulties arise.

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