



No Longer in the Doghouse

Dawn Ash-Bunting BSc (Hons) ABT

www.nolongerdoghouse.co.uk

Mobile: 07727603806

Email: nolongerdoghouse@gmail.com

The second fear impact period *occurs between 6 to 14 months of age*. Generally, this critical age occurs earlier for small dogs and later for larger ones. Development of these fears tends to be more about situations than to specific people.

What are the most common symptoms of a fear period?

1. Acts afraid of people, animals, and/or unfamiliar objects.
2. Startles easily at noises or sudden changes (we often see dogs become afraid of their reflection during this time!)
3. Barks and backs away from new things.

As a teenager they are bigger, so the 'reaction' seems more extreme and how we then handle the next step is crucial on them development into an adult.

Never be afraid to lower the triggers and stress levels to rest the brain and then build up the positive association of what they are worried about.

Puppy "fear periods" are perfectly normal but the way you manage your pup's reactions at this time will influence the way he or she behaves in adulthood.

What are puppy fear periods?

As your puppy develops from birth to maturity, his body and brain go through a lot of changes. Puppy fear periods are a normal part of growing up. Behaviourists believe that they are a primeval mechanism to keep the puppy safe from danger and help it to live comfortably with the other dogs in the social group.

There are 2 main fear periods. The first one usually occurs sometime between 8 and 12 weeks. The second is roughly between 6 and 14 months of age and can seem more like a series of shorter fear periods.

The first fear period coincides with the time of life when young puppies are physically strong enough to leave the nest and start investigating the wider world. In nature, if they were to wander too far from Mum's protection, they could be vulnerable to all sorts of things. (Like a



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human toddler wobbling off out of Mum's sight)

The second fear period is equivalent to human adolescents, where the need to become more independent is coupled with the necessity of staying safe. In nature, adolescent dogs join the pack to hunt for food, but they need to know the difference between the thrill of the chase and the risk of getting hurt. The message to the puppy is to run away if something unfamiliar approaches them.

Recognising fear periods in puppies

When your puppy is going through a fear period certain stimuli or events (and they are different for each pup) may prompt a stress reaction. You might notice a change in body language such as:

- furrowed brow
- tail tucked in
- crouching posture
- wide eyes
- lip licking
- staring
- panting
- vocalising (barking or whining)
- looking away from the scary thing
- running to a safe place
- greater reactivity to other dogs

You might not see the logic in your pup's suddenly different reaction to stimulus. Something that has never been a problem might suddenly become scary for no obvious reason. However, the way you help your puppy cope with his or her emotions will have a big impact on how he or she reacts to everyday situations in the future.

How to manage puppy fear periods

First of all, puppy fear periods are normal, and they are temporary. They are not usually a



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sign that you have picked the wrong puppy, that the dog doesn't like you or that something is terribly wrong. They are simply a developmental stage that your puppy needs help with through training, socialisation and habituation.

While your pup is working his or her way through a fear period, it's important that you stay relaxed and patient. If you know your puppy is struggling, re-assure them and pair the thing they are worried about with something they do like e.g., some tasty chicken is often a winner!

Don't get angry – it won't help. All the puppy learns is “when x, y or z happens, the human gets cross therefore x, y and z need to be avoided at all costs”.

Never put the puppy under pressure. Forcing them to meet the big dog, talk to Aunty Joan, sit on the kerb while lorries whizz past his nose (or whatever the stimulus may be) will make the dog even more reluctant next time the situation arises.

Don't give up. Avoiding the problem won't make it go away.

Your job is to show your puppy that x, y and z are not scary, will not hurt him and can safely be either ignored or embraced. It's an important part of socialisation.

For dealing with fearful behaviour dog trainers have a wealth of techniques. Here are two of them.

Desensitisation for dogs and puppies

Desensitisation means exposing your puppy to a thing or a situation just a little bit at a time. But not so much that puppy feels stressed, overwhelmed or overexcited.

As soon as you see any signs of stress, remove the puppy from the situation. That way he or she knows that no matter what happens, you are a safe house.

It's important that you don't avoid scary things altogether otherwise you and your dog will have a limited lifestyle in the future. So next time you're in that situation make sure you stay at a “safe” distance – your puppy's interpretation of safe, not yours – and start building



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positive associations.

It's not unusual for a puppy to be fine with traffic/dogs/noise/visitors and then suddenly change when a fear period kicks in. All you need to do is take a step back and start doing some desensitisation.

Building positive associations

Dogs learn by association, so by pairing a scary situation with something good e.g. yummy treats, verbal reassurance and play, they will feel more positive when they meet that situation in the future.

Putting the theory into practice

Whether puppy is going through a fear period or not, socialisation and habituation are vital for a dog's long term quality of life.

Habituation is a big word that means exposing your pup to every day smells, noises, activities until the dog barely notices them. Things like the washing machine, vacuum cleaner, telephone, x-box, cats and the sound of the neighbour's lawn mower.

The things we take for granted can be quite scary to a puppy or even to an older dog who has never come across them before. Don't overwhelm them and let them get used to things in their own time. Employ some common sense though. If puppy is not keen on the washing machine, don't put his crate right next to it. On the other hand, if you wait for the dog to go out before you switch it the washing on, the situation will never improve. Just make sure your dog can see and hear the monstrous machine from a distance and has something positive to pair with the sight and sound of it e.g., a yummy Kong, filled with their favourite treats can be a fun thing to do whilst the washing machine monster is on! Over time, the fear will subside – the dog will become habituated.

Socialisation is introducing your dog to different experiences so that he or she can meet dogs, people and different situations calmly and confidently. Good socialisation can shape your puppy for the rest of their lives but done badly it can be hugely detrimental.



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