

# Loving a Shy Dog

by Laura Garber, CPDT

Developing a relationship with a shy dog can be so rewarding because, as her trust in you grows, your dog's personality will blossom and your bond for each other will deepen. It's not just an old wives' tale that good things come to those who wait! Patience is essential to building a loving bond with a shy dog.

## The Body Language of a Shy Dog

A shy dog will:

- ▷ make herself smaller, keeping her body low
- ▷ keep her tail low or even tucked
- ▷ lower her head
- ▷ pin her ears back and down
- ▷ squint or blink her eyes
- ▷ roll on her back to reveal her belly
- ▷ lick her lips
- ▷ yawn

So take things slow and read what she's telling you!

## When Meeting a Shy Dog

The best way to approach a shy dog is not to! Let her approach you in her own time. The way humans greet each other – looking straight at someone, leaning forward, reaching out our hands – is very assertive to dogs. When polite dogs greet each other, they approach indirectly, avert their gaze, and then let each other sniff. So make these same sorts of gestures in your own greeting and allow the dog to come up to sniff you.

Lower yourself by crouching or sitting on the floor. Don't face or look at her directly; instead, turn your head to the side. Offer her treats by tossing them toward her in a path that leads her closer to you and finally feeding her from your outstretched hand. As she relaxes, you can start to stroke her under her chin and on her chest. Petting the top of her head is an assertive gesture, so start from underneath and let her warm up gradually before making more bold gestures.

## As Your Love Grows

Over time you and your dog will become comfortable with each other, and your love will grow. Your dog will act more confidently around you but may still be uneasy with new people. So, keep an eye out for what she's telling you around other people. Does she lip-lick, shrink a bit at your side, even hide behind you? Take note of these signals and do what you can to keep your pup at a comfortable distance. Ask the person to avoid looking directly at her while tossing her treats. As she gets more comfortable, ask them to crouch and offer her treats from their hand, letting her move closer in her own time. She may even allow caresses under her chin or on her chest. Taking it slow definitely wins this race!

The sooner you begin exercises in meeting new people who offer her wonderful treats, the better. Strangers should be part of the landscape of her life so that she gains confidence with everything and everyone she comes in contact with. Gradually, over time and with many good experiences, she will learn that strangers often provide tasty gifts for her and she will grow to love them!

## Helpful Hints

- If your dog is passionate about a game of fetch or she loves her

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squeakies, then incorporate them into her introduction to strangers. What could be more fun than strangers tossing her a tennis ball?! The added benefit is that your dog is experiencing playfulness in the company of strangers rather than anxiety, two emotions that don't coexist.

- If your dog is dog-friendly, arrange for her to go for walks with other dogs who will give her an added level of confidence on the street.
- Make sure that your dog's walking equipment is very secure for extra safety in case she gets frightened and tries to back out of her collar or harness.
- Make sure that your dog has a collar with her tags on at all times and is properly microchipped should the worst happen.
- Feed your dog a diet that includes high-quality protein. Low-quality protein may interfere with her ability to utilize serotonin, a neurotransmitter associated with mood.
- Some dogs are comforted by DAP (Dog Appeasing Pheromone), a synthetic pheromone that mimics those given off by lactating females. Try a plug-in diffuser where your dog spends the most of her time or spritz some DAP spray onto a bandana when going out for a walk.
- Try using a snug T-shirt to give her a calming "swaddled" feeling. Alternatively, use a doggie backpack when out for walks for the same effect.
- EXERCISE! A tired dog is less likely to be reactive than a dog who's wired with energy, so you can increase her threshold of fear just by tiring her out!

## Going Away

Remember that, especially with a shy dog, the bond she has with you is very special. She will not have the same level of comfort with someone else. This can be particularly worrisome when you go away on a trip, leaving her in the care of someone else with whom she's less attached. There are too many stories of shy dogs who, without their bonded human, have gotten scared and darted away from the caregiver. Here are some tips that might help:

- Have a dog-sitter stay at your home, where your dog is comfortable and happy. Have the caregiver follow as much of your dog's normal routine as possible.
- Caution the caregiver to be vigilant around doorways leading outside or even playtime in the yard. A scared dog may try to escape by slipping through a cracked doorway or jumping a fence and, once loose, will not have the same bonded relationship that will lure her back to safety.
- If a house-sitter isn't possible, consider using a boarding kennel. Having a secure kenneling facility with a staff of professionals caring for your dog will be the best safeguard against her getting loose and lost.

Check out the June issue of Your Pet Connection for the article *Harnessing the Power of Pavlov* for more information on treating fear.

**Laura Garber & her dog, Trista**

