



Confidence Building Exercises for your Dog

It is said that confidence comes from a feeling of well-being, acceptance of yourself and a belief in your own ability. And that if we're lacking in confidence some of the ways that we restore it are to implement planning and preparation along with gaining knowledge and training.

So how do we relate that to dogs? Very much like us, a dog's ability to act confidently often comes from their own belief that they will know how to act in a given situation – or in their ability to adapt to a multitude of different situations.

To build this confidence we need to practice, a lot. But not just anything, we need to practice each component then build on it until the dog is doing the behavior second nature. For example, the first time any of us drove a car there was a lot to it. So many things to think about - the brake pedal, the steering wheel, turning on the blinkers, checking your mirrors, the speed limit, etc. but the more and more we drove the less we thought about any of these individual things, they became second nature with the act of driving. The same can be true with dogs. In the beginning we must go slow as the dogs learn to coordinate different behaviors but as they get better and better we're able to ask more and more of them as it becomes second nature.

We have two options at our disposal. The situation we're in will determine which option we'll use at any particular time....sometimes we may even use both or a combination of the two:

- 1) Management
- 2) Training

Management is what we do constantly when we have an unbalanced dog or a dog that is nervous, scared or otherwise less than confident when approaching the world. Management is a great tool to use while your dog is learning new behaviors and something that you will use throughout their lifetimes whenever a new or scary situation presents itself.

Training is teaching your dog different behaviors that the two of you can turn to when your dog is scared or fearful. The more behaviors we can teach a dog the more we can ask them to think and do different activities when they're stressed. By getting them 'into their heads' we are able to give them something else to focus on rather than being caught up in their bad habits.

Managing your Dogs Environment

Management is ensuring your dog (and his/her environment) is safe. It's managing the environment to be sure your dog has a safe place to go or a safe zone. For example, I am often around a lot of dogs. I have one dog who doesn't do well with a lot of dogs around. So anytime that happens and we're close to my truck, I open my truck, she jumps right in and is comfortable and happy that she has a safe place to go. That's managing the situation.

Eyes in the back of your head

One thing that's difficult but necessary when you have a dog like this is that you always must have one eye on your dog or on the situation, so you can manage it. And it's often helpful to be a little ahead of the situation. For example, if your dog doesn't do well with children it's necessary to always step between your dog and a child, even if the child is really wanting to pet your dog. If your dog is scared of large men in hats and you see one

coming toward you down the sidewalk, the best management tool is to walk your dog off to the side, put your dog in park while standing between your dog and the man, and distract your dog with some exercises.

Management, like training is a joint effort with you and your dog. It's typically not enough to tell your dog not to do something, instead it's helpful to give them something specific to do. For example, if I'm walking the dog I mentioned earlier off leash, she's often out in front of me. But anytime we see something on the trail she immediately runs back to me and walks just behind my right leg. This is a safe position that I taught her early on and one that she uses often.

Giving your dogs a safe place by your side is one of the best ways you can manage your scared dog. Not only does it immediately cue you to your dog's distress and possible upset but it also puts them in a location where you can protect them and protect the world from their behavior (if needed).

Number One Way to Help your Dog Relax....

Have a Routine!

Dogs need to Know what to Expect; they need to Anticipate what's Coming

To change your dog's association from one of fear to one of confidence

- 1) Teach your dog a handful of basic behaviors (for example: touch, circle, look, high 5, etc.)
- 2) Practice at home over and over and over until they're second nature to your dog
- 3) Bring your dog to a new place and practice the behaviors over and over

Important Guidelines to Remember...

- If your dog is nervous in a new place, don't stay long but come back within a few days to repeat
- Repeat the same walking path over and over so your dog can relax and excel at it - don't change your route too often
- To gain confidence quickly, get good at something – so do this with your dog, the more they're praised they happier and more confident they'll be
- The goal is to have them doing exercises so well that they do them automatically when you ask
- Be consistent – don't leave your dog guessing, be consistent in your behaviors and actions
- Know your dog! So you can get ahead of any issues or react when you see them becoming upset
- Focus on all the good – have fun...if we're stressed out we're not empowered to learn
- The way people perceive us affects us....this is true for dogs too; if your dog looks better with a haircut or a brushing....give it to them so they can look their best – maybe they could sport a bandana 😊
- Be sure to pet scared dogs under their chins to encourage their heads up (much like us holding our shoulders back or smiling for 2minutes each morning in the shower)



Training Behaviors for your Insecure Dog

Touch exercise

Teach your dog to touch the palm of your hand (or the back of your hand) with their nose. This behavior is easy to teach and can be used to get your dog into different positions or to work through a difficult behavior. For example, if I have a dog that is refusing to go over an agility jump, often, all I do is ask them to touch on the other side of the jump and they'll quickly jump over to touch my hand.

To teach Touch, move smelly treats from one hand to the other, then using the hand without the treats, place it in front of your dog – just off to the side of their nose, approximately 1" away. As soon as your dog touches your hand with their nose, say Yes! And give them a treat. Repeat....a lot before moving your hands. Once your dog is touching your hand virtually 100% of the time, then add the word "Touch!" in a happy asking voice. As your dog gets better and better, begin moving your hands farther and farther away.

Touch (or targeting) is used to teach dogs to turn on and off light switches, push exercise balls through goal posts and to do many other activities. It's a great foundational tool and one that can be generalized very easily for dogs.

Look

Here we want our dog to look us in the eye and hold eye contact until we release. We teach this by holding our index finger up near our eyes. As our dogs looks at us, say Yes! And treat. As your dog gets better and better at this you're going to want to increase the length of time they look at you. But because this exercise is very intangible be sure to let your dog know when they're doing it right....as a dog is looking at me I will often say "yes, yes, good look, yes" to acknowledge them and encourage them to continue looking until I release them with the word "okay!"

Circle

Circle is a simple behavior to teach your dog but one that works great to help them dissipate some building energy or if they need you to hear them and are having a difficult time communicating with you. To teach circle we have the dogs follow a treat in a wide circle. As they get better and better we want to tighten the circle up, I also ask most dogs for a sit on the end of the circle, just to contain any additional energy. Asking a dog to circle is a great way to interrupt them when they're hyper-focused on something or when they are getting antsy but aren't allowed to go anywhere yet.

If your dog is a rock star at this, ask them to circle left or circle right (teaching dogs their left and right is a great way to increase the difficulty on many behaviors!)

Walk just behind your right leg

This is teaching your dog that there is a safe spot right next to you. I have also found it to be good to teach them to be just behind you a bit (as many insecure dogs can have the tendency to bark or lunge). I will often use the touch behavior to get them into place then use a word to 'mark' them when they're there. Words or statements used include 'safe spot' 'here' 'on my side' 'behind me' – it really doesn't matter what you say, as long as your consistent and the words you chose flow easily from your lips.

Anytime your dog is in position, be sure to mark them with the word or words you want to use and give them a treat. A couple of points to remember here, if you ignore your dog when they're in the safe zone, they'll stop

considering it safe, so you need to acknowledge them when they're there. But don't let your dog lean on you or trip you (use crazy feet if your dog does this).

Go to their place (Make this a safe place!)

Scared dogs need a safe place. This could be on a bed or in a crate or on the furniture. Often if you have a small dog, the safe place needs to be an elevated one or one that is out of the heavily traveled area. Most dogs want to be close to their family, so a crate in the bedroom won't work for this, it must be at least near to where the family is.

If you have children it is extremely important that they are taught not to bother the dog when the dog is on or in their place. For a dog to really relax they need to feel like they're secure and no little fingers will be poking at them or pulling at their whiskers.

To teach this, sit next to the dogs bed and with a swooping hand motion, say the words you'd like to use "go to your bed/place/spot/crate" etc. Have a treat in your hand and stop your hand motion in the middle of the dogs bed. If the dog comes over to investigate, say Yes! And give them a treat. Repeat. As they start anticipating what's going to happen, add in the hand signal for sit then down before giving them the Yes! with the treat. Repeat often!

Additional exercises to consider

Puzzle solving – puzzles - from toilet paper rolls smeared with peanut butter to expensive plastic ones in the stores, are great for dogs and give them a real sense of accomplishment when they achieve the objective

Go around – this is a great behavior that dogs generalize well and it also works as a problem-solver and one scared dogs can use to get away from something they aren't comfortable with

Leave it – a must for any nervous dog! This is another command that is generalized well and can be used in a variety of settings. Often to stop a dog from getting into something you know will upset them!

Ah-ah – is a non-reinforcement marker for dogs (and people). It is meant to imply information but not that something is right or wrong. I use it often to remind dogs that I've asked them to do something. It also works great to alleviate growing tensions between more than one dog or a dog and cat.

Anytime we're working with an unbalanced dog it's important to note that we're constantly walking a fine line between acknowledging and supporting and pushing and encouraging. We need to give them a safe place to explore the world but we need to also encourage them to explore it. Hiding doesn't solve any problems. But it is important that we provide them with coping mechanisms that they can turn to when the world seems too much.

Remember the most important thing you can do for your scared or fearful dog is give them attention! By trying to see the world through their eyes or at the very least noticing their distress and upset, you can quickly get the situation under control or give your dog the reinforcement they need.