

## What Is Confidence Building and How Can It Help Your Dog?

### Why does my dog lack confidence?

There are dogs who are born with a predisposition to be shy and careful in their approach to new aspects of life just like some people. Other dogs may have had traumatic experiences, which have imprinted some fear responses that then spread to a variety of everyday life situations. Yet, another category of dogs have been rescued from rural environments where the interaction with new people, or even maybe their caretaker, has been much lacking and where the environment – in terms of new sights and experiences in general - has been sparse.

The latter category of dogs have a better chance to find a new chance at a good life in a more densely populated area so are, therefore, often transported to urban environments such as ours. Suddenly the dog finds himself in a highly stimulating environment with constant exposure to new people, city traffic, paved streets and other intense sounds and visuals he was never quite prepared for to handle. This in combination with new demands on how to behave and act in the new family setting can lead some dogs to totally lose confidence and let the fear and anxiety take over. It can become a real challenge for a new family who adopts one of these dogs to know how to properly handle the situation.

*A Confidence Building Class can help all three of these categories of dogs and their owners learn the tools to lead a happier, less stressful life.*

### How would I know if my dog lacks confidence?

We think of these dogs as highly stressed animals who have to deal with situations in their environment on a daily, or almost daily basis, which results in a change in their behavior in a way that is not productive for themselves or those in the close vicinity. The dog may react by lashing out due to immense emotional pressure that stems out of fear and inability to cope with the situation, or the dog may appear listless and disinterested engaging with his environment.

These dogs who need a confidence building class often have several types of stressors they are dealing with. An owner will often say that their dog is fearful of loud noises *and* gets anxious when left home alone...or they are fearful of other dogs *and* strangers they have never met before. It is important to help these dogs build a solid foundation and find the base line; something that makes the dog feel good, and help them start building from there to cope with these different situations.

While some dogs show obvious signs of discomfort in certain settings, there are other dogs that exhibit much more subtle signs that may not materialize in a big problem for the owner, but may still be a quality issue for the dog. Here are some things to look out for:

- A food motivated dog that will not take high-value treats in certain settings, around people, around other dogs or when exposed to loud noises, etc
- A dog that suddenly is very still or stiff. A comfortable dog will have a relaxed body posture
- A dog with the tail tucked and lowered body carriage

- A dog that shows general lack of interest in certain settings
- A dog that acts very distracted and does not respond to cues and seems unable to focus on you
- A dog that acts very clingy
- A dog that whines, paces or pants in certain settings

### **What can I do on my own?**

Stress symptoms are involuntary responses that are both expressed in physical and emotional experiences. It can take on a life of its own and place the dog in automatic “coping mode.” Often we do not realize how debilitating this condition can be for the dog unless we can relate to any fear provoking or highly stressful situations we have been exposed to on a continuous basis of our own. So, it is important to remember that these dogs do not choose to be difficult in these, for them, challenging settings. They are purely acting out of an emotion. It can be frustrating when you have a dog that refuses to go in the car, lunges at strangers or just refuses to walk or do their business in your neighborhood because the noise is loud due to traffic.

It is absolutely critical for dogs that are anxious and lacking in confidence to have a good balance between physical exercise and mental stimulation. If the dog is getting too much exercise it can actually result in a more stressed and hyperactive dog. Moderate exercise in combination with engaging their cognitive, problem solving part of the brain is the ideal.

Dogs lacking in confidence should be provided a safe and happy place that they can enjoy everyday and then try as much as possible to approach the situations that cause them stress as a training exercise where you expose them a little bit at a time and trying to help them bridge the gap between safe and scary to, in the end, at least make it a tolerable experience. It can be very challenging in our area where many dog owners also have busy work schedules and do not have time to coax their dog a few steps in 20 minutes. If the dog is afraid of traffic you may have to drive them to a calmer area. If the dog is afraid of the car you may have to practice a multitude of entries and exits and avoid taking the dog in the car as much as possible until he feels more comfortable. The more you get tense and annoyed about the situation the more the dog is going to stress out about it and you can actually create a bigger problem than you started with.

### **How does a Confidence Building class help?**

In our confidence building classes we have a few components that are recurring themes:

- Counterconditioning and desensitization exercises where we expose the dogs to people, novel visuals, different sounds and surfaces, meeting each other on leash, etc
- Relaxation exercises
- Playing games to try to get their minds to a “happy place.” It is impossible to be fearful and anxious and play and have a good time simultaneously. If they can engage in play in class we know they are in the right frame of mind.
- We use techniques like “touch” and “find it” to encourage exploration and problem-solving

Hanna is a young Dachshund who was adopted within the year and came to her owner lacking in social skills, both with dogs and people. She also had difficulty being left home alone. Hanna’s owner, Christina, was very committed and worked diligently on her separation anxiety and attended basic obedience classes regularly.

Hanna had steady progress but Christina felt that for some of Hanna's issues more intense work was needed. She signed up for our Confidence Building class.

**Here is Christina's own description of Hanna:** *"Hanna was extremely tentative and fearful of other people, dogs and some things we took for granted with our former dog, such as knowing how to play and wanting to play. Often her fear of people was manifested in barking and growling as people would approach her -- so we seemed to be on a downward spiral. My hope was that the confidence building class would help make her less fearful and not react negatively when people approached us. Our experience with the class was great -- and it not only built Hanna's confidence, but mine as well. Because it was a small class, both Hanna and I got lots of "hands-on" attention and training. The trainers worked with us on specific issues and situations that seemed to be most troublesome for Hanna - such as people walking up to Hanna and looking down at her. They also worked with her to learn to be more relaxed and to enjoy exploring new toys. One technique that we learned -- asking strangers to put out their hand and having Hanna do a quick touch - has worked wonders in calming her when she is meeting new people. And now instead viewing other dogs as a threat, she wants to play with every dog she meets. Everyone who has been around her -- neighbors, clerks at our nearby pet store -- have remarked on the transformation! While we still have work to do, both of us have made tremendous progress."* (Printed with permission from Christina Benson, Hanna's mom).

Hanna is a great example of a suitable candidate for a Confidence Building class. She had several areas where a lack of confidence seemed to be the root cause. The Confidence Building class accelerated her progress to become a more confident and content dog and provided Christina with specific tools she could use to handle Hanna. Christina became an effective force in teaching Hanna that life and new experiences are good!