

Golden Health

Do You Have a Shy Dog?

by *Kathy Burton*

GRR Director of Education

with special thanks to the foster families, adoptive families, and wonderful Golden Retrievers who have taught us so much about shy dogs and how to help them:

*Allie,
Jenny,
Sallie,
Gidget,
and Brandy.*

In volunteering for Gold Ribbon Rescue, we get to hear about, read about, and meet a lot of dogs. They come to our organization from owners who surrender them to us, from shelters that work with us, and from Good Samaritans who hear about us and ask, "please, can you help?" We probably encounter more dogs in a year than most pet owners do in a lifetime.

And occasionally, we'll meet a Shy Dog. What is a shy dog? She's that little puppy who seemed timid from the start, a little less confident than the rest of the litter. Sometimes, there's a genetic basis for shyness: it's theorized that a dog may inherit a "shy gene" from one parent, usually the mother. It's also possible that shy pups don't actually inherit their personality: they simply model a shy mother's behavior. External factors can also play a role, though the idea that shyness typically results from abuse is a common misconception (in fact, this is only rarely the case).

So where does shyness come from? Most often, it simply stems from a lack of good socialization during early puppyhood. If a dog isn't properly socialized from birth to approximately age 17 weeks, he can turn out to be a "scaredy cat," frightened of anything new or unfamiliar. Frightening things can be something as simple as a child's balloon—and the fear can then extend to the child holding the balloon. New people entering the house can be scary; new noises can be scary. Some dogs

will bark madly, some will hide behind a piece of furniture or their owner, some will roll over on their backs, display their bellies, and "leak" slightly (submissive urination). All these responses are typical shy-dog reactions to something new or strange. And "new or strange" doesn't necessarily mean "never before encountered": for reasons not well understood even by the experts, a person your dog may have seen a hundred times can remain "strange" each time he comes to visit. Maybe your brother-in-law shows up like clockwork twice a week, but to your shy dog, he's a complete stranger every time he knocks on the door.

Not all shy dogs exhibit these traits in puppyhood. They probably weren't the boldest pups of the group, but they may have seemed just a little hesitant with new things and new people. Real shyness commonly doesn't show up until the dog is approaching puberty; in a spayed or neutered dog, it may not even appear until some point between 12 and 18 months old.

What can be done to help a dog like this? The answer to that question depends on the degree of shyness. A dog who's just a little shy typically assumes a belly-up position with some submissive urination when a guest arrives. The best way to handle this kind of dog is to keep things low-key. Everyone who walks into the house should pretty much ignore the dog. No eye contact, no petting, no leaning over the dog, no excited greetings. (I know this one is hard for most people!) You and your guests should just go about your business and let the dog come to you. I think of this as playing "invisible dog." Please don't tell the dog "it's OK" and try to console her—by essentially confirming her feeling that she DOES have something to fear, you will reinforce the very behavior you want to change.

All canines operate by repeating behaviors that get them what they want and avoiding those that don't. What's more, most dogs are less reactive if they are engaged in something they enjoy, like getting a treat (or taking a walk, or playing with a favorite toy). So work on getting your dog to think, "New person equals something good!" As you practice the "invisible dog" approach, keep some yummy treats at hand (and let your guests take some, too) and reward the dog—casually, not with wild excitement!—once he works up the courage to approach the humans. (You can operate more or less the same way with scary THINGS—if your dog cowers when she even sees the vacuum cleaner, for instance, try leaving it out in the room, festooned with treats, so she's automatically rewarded for approaching it.) Take it slow, be patient, and have faith: what a puppy should have learned to make him a confident, calm dog can still be instilled into an older dog. Of course, the younger the dog, the higher the likelihood of success, but all dogs can benefit from behavior modification training.

For dogs who are extremely shy and fearful, the help of a good trainer can be invaluable. And if you EVER feel your dog could become fearful enough to bite, seeking professional help is essential—the sooner, the better. There are many ways to re-socialize a dog; just be sure to pick a trainer who uses positive reinforcement. You can find a few of GRR's recommended trainers on our website under <http://www.grr-tx.com/links/links.htm>.

Do remember that what may appear to be a behavior issue could have a physical cause, so always get your dog a thorough physical exam before starting behavior modification on your own. Most owners of shy dogs tell me how sweet and wonderful their dog is when she's at ease, and I've met

Continued on Page 4



Golden Health

Do You Have a Shy Dog? —continued from Pg 3.

many of these Golden Retrievers can attest to the truth of that claim. So don't give up! With time, almost every dog can gain the self-confidence and self-control to show the same happy, relaxed face to the rest of the world as she does to her nearest and dearest.

Resources:

Comfort Zone® reduces or completely stops stress-related behaviors such as barking, whimpering, whining, chewing, and anxiety-induced urination and defecation. It is not a drug or a tranquilizer; instead, it mimics a naturally reassuring pheromone produced by female dogs when nursing. To use, simply plug Comfort Zone into an outlet in the room most used by the dog. Odorless and nontoxic, it does not affect humans, covers an area of 500-650 sq. ft., and lasts about 4 weeks per bottle. Available at PetsMart or Petco.

SENSE-ation® Dog Harnesses: the shy dog who may react negatively to a leash attached to a standard flat collar may have no problem adjusting to a harness. The Sense-ation harness has a D-ring at the lower chest area for leash attachment; it puts no pressure on the neck. Available at www.softtouchconcepts.com.

Rescue Remedy is a combination of flower essences created to address stress, whether due to a crisis situation (moving day, roadwork and a crew of hardhats right outside the front door) or something as simple as a visit to the vet. For the everyday stress of people coming and going, put 4 drops in the dog's water bowl. A couple of drops can also be rubbed into the leathery underside of the ear for situations where a faster effect is needed. Rescue Remedy will not interfere with other medications and has no toxic dose level. Available at Whole Foods, Sun

Harvest Farms, and most other health-food stores; can also be ordered online.

Books:

Help for Your Shy Dog by Deborah Wood. Available at www.dogwise.com and from other book sellers.

The Cautious Canine: How to Help Dogs Conquer Their Fears, by Patricia McDonald. Available through www.dogwise.com and other book sellers.

On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals by Turid Rugaas. A wonderful little book for any owner, but especially useful for owners of shy dogs. It provides a guide for reading a dog's body language to detect signs of stress—and shows how you can use your own body language to help calm a dog. Available through www.dogwise.com and other book sellers.

