

# Helping Your Dog Overcome Fearful, Startling Noises



It is not uncommon for dogs to be frightened of thunder, firecrackers or other loud sounds. These types of fears may develop even though your dog has had no traumatic experiences associated with the sound. Many fear-related problems can be successfully resolved. However, if left untreated, your dog's fearful behavior will probably get worse.

The most common behavior problems associated with fear of loud noises are destruction and escaping. When your dog becomes frightened, she tries to reduce her fear. She may try to escape to a place where the sounds of thunder or firecrackers are less intense. If, by leaving the yard or going into a certain room or area of the house, she feels less afraid, then the escape or destructive behavior is reinforced because it successfully lessens her fear. For some dogs, just the activity or physical exertion associated with one of these behaviors may be an outlet for their anxiety. Unfortunately, escape and/or destructive behavior can be a problem for you and could also result in physical injury to your dog.

Things that are present in the environment whenever your dog hears the startling noise can, from her viewpoint, become associated with the frightening sound. Over a period of time, she may become afraid of other things in the environment that she associates with the noise that frightens her. For example, dogs that are afraid of thunder may later become afraid of the wind, dark clouds and flashes of light that often precede the sound of thunder. Dogs that are afraid of firecrackers may become afraid of the children who have the firecrackers or may become afraid to go in the backyard, if that is where they usually hear the noise.

## What You Can Do to Help

### Create a Safe Place

Try to create a safe place for your dog to go to when she hears the noises that frighten her. But remember, this must be a safe location from her perspective, not yours. Notice where she goes, or tries to go, when she is frightened, and if at all possible, give her access to that place. If she is trying to get inside the house, consider installing a dog door. If she is trying to get under your bed, give her access to your bedroom. You can also create a "hidey-hole" that is dark, small and shielded from the frightening sound as much as possible (a fan or radio playing will help block out the sound). Encourage her to go there when you are home and the thunder or other noise occurs. Feed her in that location and associate other "good things" happening to her there. She must be able to come and go from this location freely. Confining her in the "hidey-hole" when she does not want to be there will only cause more problems. The "safe place" approach may work with some dogs, but not all. Some dogs are motivated to move and be active when frightened and "hiding out" will not help them feel less fearful.

### Distract Your Dog

This method works best when your dog is just beginning to get anxious. Encourage her to engage in any activity that captures her attention and distracts her from behaving fearfully. Start when she first alerts you to the noise and is not yet showing a lot of fearful behavior, but is only watchful. **Immediately** try to interest her in doing something that she really enjoys. Get out the tennis ball and play fetch (in an escape-proof area) or practice some commands that she knows. Give her a lot of praise and treats for paying attention to the game or the commands. As the storm or the noise builds, you may not be able to keep her attention on the activity, but it might delay the start of the fearful behavior for longer and longer each time you do it. If you cannot keep her attention and she begins acting afraid, stop the process. If you continue, you may inadvertently reinforce her fearful behavior.

### Behavior Modification

Behavior modification techniques are often successful in reducing fears and phobias. The appropriate techniques are called "counter-conditioning" and "desensitization." This means to condition or teach your dog to respond in non-fearful ways to sounds and other stimuli that previously frightened her. This must be done **very gradually**.

Begin by exposing her to an intensity level of noise that does not frighten her and pair it with something pleasant, like a treat or a fun game. Gradually increase the volume as you continue to offer her something pleasant. Through this process, she will come to associate “good things” with the previously feared sound.

#### **Example:**

- Make a tape with firecracker noises on it.
- Play the tape at such a low volume that your dog does not respond fearfully. While the tape is playing, feed her dinner, give her a treat or play her favorite game.
- In your next session, play the tape a little louder while you feed her or play her favorite game.
- Continue increasing the volume through many sessions over a period of several weeks or months. If at any time while the tape is playing, she displays fearful behavior, STOP. Begin your next session at a lower volume—one that does not produce anxiety—and proceed more slowly.

If these techniques are not used correctly, they will not be successful and can even make the problem worse. For some fears, it can be difficult to recreate the fear stimulus. For example, thunder is accompanied by changes in barometric pressure, lightning and rain, and your dog’s fearful response may be to the combination of these things and not just the thunder. You may need professional assistance to create and implement this kind of behavior modification program.

#### **Consult Your Veterinarian**

Medication may be available which can make your dog less anxious for short time periods. Your veterinarian is the only person who is licensed and qualified to prescribe medication for your dog. Do not attempt to give your dog any over-the-counter or prescription medication without consulting your veterinarian. Animals do not respond to drugs the same way people do, and a medication that may be safe for humans could be fatal to your dog. Drug therapy alone will not reduce fears and phobias permanently, but in extreme cases, behavior modification and medication used together might be the best approach.

#### **What NOT to Do**

- Attempting to reassure your dog when she is afraid may reinforce her fearful behavior. If you pet, soothe or give treats to her when she is behaving fearfully, she may interpret this as a reward for her fearful behavior. Instead, try to behave normally, as if you do not notice her fearfulness.
- Putting your dog in a crate to prevent her from being destructive during a thunderstorm is not recommended. She will still be afraid when she is in the crate and is likely to injure herself, perhaps even severely, while attempting to get out of the crate.
- Do not punish your dog for being afraid. Punishment will only make her more fearful.
- Do not try to force your dog to experience or be close to the sound that frightens her. For example, making her stay close to a group of children who are lighting firecrackers will only make her more afraid, and could cause her to become aggressive in an attempt to escape from the situation.
- Obedience classes will not make your dog less afraid of thunder or other noises, but could help boost her general confidence.

These approaches do not work because they do not decrease your dog’s fear. Merely trying to prevent her from escaping or being destructive will not work. If she is still afraid, she will continue to show that fear in whatever way she can (digging, jumping, climbing, chewing, barking, howling).

#### **Animal Behavior Specialists**

If your dog has severe fears and phobias and you are unable to achieve success with the techniques we have outlined here, refer to our handout: Finding Help for Serious Behavior Problems.

