



Training & Behavior Resources

*If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Behavior and Training Department by phone: 410-235-8826 Ext. 151 or by email: trainer@mdspca.org.

Shy Dogs

Dogs bond strongly to humans. They can learn to be alone for moderate periods but it doesn't come naturally. It's not surprising, then, that about one in five dogs show symptoms of separation anxiety when alone: uncontrollable urinating or defecating; destruction of furniture, walls, windows or flooring; self-injury while attempting to escape kennels; vomiting and drooling; or long periods of barking and crying.

Some dogs with separation anxiety are fine when left alone in the car or when the owner takes out the garbage—they've learned the difference between "long absence" scenarios and "short absence" scenarios. Others are anxious in all contexts.

The degree of anxiety shown by some dogs with separation anxiety is consistent with that of panic attacks in people. This is the key take-away if you're struggling to cope with and make sense of your dog's behavior. Dogs with separation anxiety are not misbehaving out of boredom, spite or for fun, and scolding them for what they do when alone will not solve—and could even worsen—the problem.

Different Kinds of Shyness

The most common kinds of shyness in dogs are:

- **Social shyness**, where the dog is fearful of unfamiliar people. Dogs like this are sometimes described as "taking a while to warm up," "one-man dogs" or "protective." They are usually fine with a person once they get to know them. Examples are dogs who are afraid of men or children, or bark at people who walk or dress differently.
- **Context fears**, where the dog is afraid of certain kinds of situations. Examples are dogs who are vet-phobic, panic during car rides or are uncomfortable in new places.
- **Sound sensitivities**, where the dog is afraid of loud noises. They flatten and try to escape when a car backfires, or pace and salivate during thunderstorms or fireworks.

Why Is He Like This?

Fear is common in animals. Although it's possible that a fearful dog has suffered abuse or a bad experience, most fear results from a combination of a genetic predisposition and some lack of experience in the first weeks of life. A dog may have missed becoming socialized to new people by simply not being around them enough when he was a puppy.

Will He Get Better?

Most fearful dogs can be helped to gradually improve. This is a slow process in most cases and requires patience. Shy dogs are not for everybody. They need people who have compassion and patience.

The best thing is to expose him to what frightens him but at a milder intensity and combined with a positive association. A dog who is afraid of children might start to feel comfortable if he regularly sees children but at a distance where he doesn't feel worried. If you pat him and give him treats, he will start to see kids as good news: "Wow, great things happen to me when kids are around!" Dogs learn strongly from association.

How Can I Help Him Settle in to His New Home?

The best strategy is to let the dog go at his own pace. Any kind of pressure or coercion to make contact makes things worse. Let the dog hide if he needs to, investigate things and come to you when he feels ready. Make the world safe for him and he'll improve.