

# THE SHY DOG PRIMER

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When it comes to dogs, the main concern in the eyes of the general public is regarding aggression. A quick look at the dog bite statistics in the U.S. will tell you why. While the most horrific headline-grabbing incidents tend to happen because a dog pursues and attacks a much weaker human who may be viewed as prey (think of the latest mauling of a child by a large dog), a large number of dog bites may be attributed to a dog in *defense* drive, who is biting for a totally different reason.

## What is defense drive?

In its best light, defense drive is the protective instinct that causes a dog to put himself in harm's way in order to protect his territory or perhaps other pack members. In a pet dog, we may see it when normally friendly Fido acts like Cujo behind his garden fence or when he valiantly defends his owner's car from pedestrians as the car waits at a stop light. In its more commonly reported version, defense drive is seen in the dog who curls his lip when a hand is extended to him. And in its extreme version, defense drive may be seen in the frightening self-preservation response of a dog who acts like a cornered rat when approached by a person.

Some dog experts say that dogs are "fight or flight" animals and that a dog in defense is a dog who is strictly afraid. Hence the term "fear aggression" which one hears about a lot. (I personally don't use the term, as "aggression" by definition is forward-moving and usually confident; whereas "fear" produces the backwards moving, terrified reaction I describe below). However, anyone who has watched a police K9 or a well-trained protection sport dog in action is seeing a balance of prey drive and defense drive. A well-adjusted dog in defense drive may be serious, but it is an anthropomorphic stretch to characterize his behavior as "frightened". Also, there are other basic options besides "fight or flight", and a normal dog will often explore those in a new situation. Most normal dogs will choose the option of contact with the new person, animal, or object, and make their next decision based on the outcome of the contact. An insecure dog will usually choose to remove himself from the situation. And a very shy dog will immediately choose to flee. If flight is prevented, the shy dog will respond as if cornered, and a frightening display will follow. In a truly shy dog, there may be a submissive display with the dog rolling itself, crying and urinating. In its most extreme manifestation, shyness can take on the appearance of what some would term aggression: the hackles on the dog's shoulders all the

way to his tail will usually go up, his ears will usually lay flat against his head, and his lips will stretch all the way back, exposing every tooth. The "aggressive" element is during that brief second when the dog strikes out at the perceived threat, having exhausted all of his other options. This strike or bite is often delivered to the hand of a person attempting to calm the dog or pet him, and in many cases, is made to the retreating legs or backside once the person turns away. An experienced dog trainer will recognize this as strictly fearful behavior and the term "aggression" will be left out of the description, although the term "fear biter" may now be correctly applied to this dog!

In some dogs, one will see the full-blown defensive reaction well before the dog's options to flee are exhausted. This is the dog who hackles and growls at a person who is at some distance and is basically non-threatening. I classify this dog as being "sharp-shy"; one of the most difficult temperament characteristics to deal with in a pet dog, and unfortunately, a common deficit in modern pet Doberman temperament. Recognizing this behavior for what it is may be the most important step in dealing with its modification.

### **The limits of socialization**

By the time a dog owner realizes that he has this particular problem with his Dobe, the dog has probably reached adolescence at least. It is troubling to me that so many erstwhile dog trainers and behaviorists advise this owner to set about "socializing" his dog at this point.

The term "socialization" gets thrown around a lot. To most pet dog trainers, it means exposing the affected dog to the people/animals/situations which produce the fearful reaction, and either neutralizing the situation or positively reinforcing the dog's non-reaction. Depending on where on the spectrum of expectations the trainer's and owner's hopes and beliefs fall, this can be either a good, proactive way of helping the dog and handler, or a frustrating, time-consuming exercise and disaster waiting to happen.

Knowing your dog's limits is key. Expanding them a little at a time may be possible, but expecting a quaking, fear-biting four year old dog to become a charming, confident "Lassie" will be an exercise in futility. Yes, these things have happened successfully, but they are truly the exception. There is a major difference between a fairly normal dog who gets spooked by men who wear baseball caps, for instance, and the dog who has hidden behind the owner's legs from the age of eight weeks. The former may be a somewhat shy, reserved dog who overreacts to a particular stimulus, and a good candidate for later-life socialization. The latter is probably a victim of poor genetics, and it is better to recognize that dog's limits right out of the gate. Proper socialization is accomplished very early in a pup's life, and should still be attempted with the genetically shy dog if she is in your hands as a seven or eight week old. Although you will not necessarily make her outgoing, you will at least put in some good groundwork and help her to feel less threatened by her world. Sadly, when most people acquire a shy dog, it is already well into the dog's adolescence or adulthood: these are the dogs who are at shelters and dog pounds, pups left past their prime at a pet shop, or benignly neglected pets re-homed through the classified ads. By the time they are in their new home, socialization may be wishful thinking. If it is not attempted with careful forethought and realistic goals, the owner may only succeed in allowing his dog to react fearfully again and again with each attempt at exposure.

Owners who have consulted with me about their shy or sharp shy dogs inevitably talk about socializing the dog. However, what most pet owners are doing is simply exposing the dog to situations she can't handle, and hoping that time will take its course. Granted, in some dogs this is successful: repeated exposure to the same stimulus may result in the dog's growing acceptance of it. But in a truly shy dog, the owner is often not prepared to recognize the dog's failure, and their methods of interacting with the dog during these attempts actually end up doing more harm than good.

### *"Show me"*

I should move to Missouri, as their state motto is also my dog training motto. When an owner describes an incredibly complex chain of behaviors they see in their dog, I say "Show me". When a dogmatic trainer who swears by the 100% effectiveness of their one chosen method comes-a-callin' to convert me away from my balanced approach, I say "Show me". When a new training technique or piece of equipment shows up on the radar screen, I pack up some dogs, go to its inventor/promoter and say "Show me". Where did I get this Doubting Thomas-like addiction to empirical evidence?

### *The dogs.*

Dogs are great for a lot of reasons, but one of my favorite things about them is how direct and primitive they are. Living with our resident pack, I see the "show me" concept practiced all the time. Hannah and Luther can have a noisy, violent argument about a toy, and then settle down next to each other for a nap. A raised lip from Jane quietly repels Ludwig away from a favored sleeping spot. A sudden alert bark from Java will get Tilly racing with him to the apple trees in order to menace the chipmunks. Their communication is physical, direct and simple. They show each other more information in the space of a ten second encounter than I can give you in the many pages of this article. Hannah and Luther don't sit down and work out a timeshare plan for that Gumabone. Jane doesn't reassure Ludwig that she loves him even though he can't have her dog bed. Java doesn't encourage a reluctant Tilly to join him because maybe this time they'll actually catch one of those little hairballs. They just show each other. Remembering this trait is one of the best things you can do in the management and training of a shy dog.

One scenario for you, experienced in two ways: the human, anthropomorphic way, and the canine way.

Mary owns a very shy dog named Boo who is spooked by the man they pass every morning on their walk. He's a nice enough man, he doesn't really bother Mary or her dog, he's just out for his own constitutional. Mary hates that Boo is so shy, and becomes determined to help him overcome his fear. When she sees that her neighbor is approaching, Mary knows that Boo is going to pull behind her and growl. So, as soon as she sees the man on the horizon, she shortens Boo's leash so that he can't duck behind her. As the man gets closer, Boo starts to growl. Mary decides to "explain" to Boo that he's not in danger. She strokes him gently and tells him "Shhh, it's ok...he won't hurt you...that's a good baby, shhhh...". Based on something she read on an Internet dog training site, she pops a piece of food in Boo's mouth right as the neighbor passes. Boo is still growling, and although he refused the first piece of food, he's accepted the second one. The neighbor has passed, Mary loosens up her leash, gives Boo another pat, and they go on their way. Mary decides that this is something she can do every day, and that it can't help but make Boo a more friendly dog.

Here's how Boo sees it:

There's a big guy who walks by every morning, and I don't like him. He smells weird. His nylon jogging suit makes a stange noise as he passes. He stares at me. Here he comes, I better get safe...hey, wait a minute! I can't keep my eye on this guy if I can't get behind Mom...hey, why's she holding me back so hard? Why are we stopping? *She* must hate this guy, too! Well, if *she* doesn't like him, then no WAY am I gonna give him a chance. See? I was right! She's telling me I'm good! She's *glad* that I'm "protecting her"! Finally, I've got some backup about this guy. What's this? Food? Um, not right now, I still think this guy is too close. OK, now he's gone, I'll accept my reward for scaring him off. Hey, Mom, it's ok to loosen up on my leash now. The threat is gone, I did my job. I'll really give him hell tomorrow (just hope he never calls me on it!). But you and me, Mom, if we're both nervous about this guy, then you'd think he'd get the picture and not come near us in the first place.

Uh-oh. Sounds like a communication breakdown. Mary thinks she's "socializing" Boo by talking him through his nervous behavior. Boo thinks that Mary is also scared of the passerby, based on her own rather intense, nervous behavior and the encouragement of her soothing voice and petting. Boo thinks he's on to something with this growly display. Mary is treating Boo as she would a shy child; gently explaining the intentions of the scary stranger, guaranteeing the stranger's future actions ("He won't hurt you" "It's OK", etc). Boo is responding like an animal: interpreting everything in the immediate present, at face value. Touching and soothing talk are praise. Food is a reward. A tight leash implies a nervous handler. What do you think will happen with Mary and Boo as time goes on? Call me a pessimist, but I don't foresee a happy ending here.

Let's look at a different scenario; this one doesn't have any human players in it.

A small pack of feral dogs lives in the woods of a rural town. Scavengers by definition, one of their favorite targets is the Dumpster behind the local bar and grill. A lot of stuff falls out of that Dumpster, and it's low enough to the ground that a couple of the taller dogs can actually stand up and get their heads into it to pull out likely-looking pieces of garbage. The newest litter of pups has finally reached an age where they can join the adults in their nightly foraging. It is the pups' first trip to the Dumpster. Upon first sight of it, the pups hang back. It smells of people around this area. The parking lot is wide open and the single light casts a stark glow on the pavement. Everything looks strange and threatening. The Dumpster itself is large and when the older dogs stand up to investigate it, it makes frightening noises as their nails scrape its metal surface. The pups spook and startle every time a piece of paper rattles or a can falls to the ground. At no time does their mom or an older relative come back for them and explain what's going on. None of the older dogs discuss the relative risks and merits of Doggy Dumpster Diving, nor does a caring aunt gently stroke the paw of the nervous pup as he gingerly explores the options. No way. These are DOGS. They go about their business and have a real feast for themselves. And if the pups don't get it together and come to the "table", then it's all the more buffalo wings and dinner rolls for their elders to enjoy. Eventually, the pups will take the cue from their packmates and will learn that their spooky, shy reaction doesn't get them anything but hungry. In other words, they have just acted upon one of the Basic Tenets of Dogdom:

***"Show me."***

While I'm oft heard to say that dog training isn't brain surgery, let's do a little bit of brain surgery anyway. Let's take the brain of those feral pups' mother and squeeze it into Mary's cranium. What happens on their next walk?

Mary sees that the neighbor is approaching. As far as she knows, he's not a crazed doggy serial killer. He doesn't do anything inappropriate around Boo, like trying to pet him without permission, or acting nervously himself. He usually gives Boo a quick look, but who could blame him? Boo's a good sized dog who sometimes has something to say about people passing by. Nope, the neighbor is no threat, and frankly, Mary's sick of Boo acting like a nervous mouse everytime he passes. Mary has been doing some decent obedience training with Boo, teaching him that she always has the better idea about how to act in certain situations. (This is thanks to her dog-brain transplant, too.) One of their favorite commands is "heel": a "heel" command from Mary will find Boo watching her closely while staying immediately to her left on a nice loose leash. She practiced this with the help of an instructor and worked her way from the privacy and sterility of the training room to more distracting situations like a soccer field and on her daily walks. So when she sees her neighbor approaching, she doesn't give Boo the chance to work himself up. She simply gives him a calm, confident "heel" command and keeps going. She doesn't stop in her tracks, feed him a treat, ask the neighbor to walk by four or five times so she can practice, promise Boo an ice cream if he just minds his manners. Nope. She just keeps on walking. If Boo maintains a loose leash and pays attention as they pass, perhaps she gives him a quiet but sincere, "Good boy!". Boo has learned that the most effective way to pass the neighbor safely is by following his mom's lead and just doing it. Mary and Boo have just acted out the "Show me" concept. If they are able to do this every day, they will accomplish more in a couple of weeks than any amount of treats and petting will in months.

### **Obedience training with a purpose**

The natural instinct of most pet dog owners is to shield their shy dog from any perceived discomfort or hardship. Unfortunately, depending on your dog's level of shyness, this may include nearly everything except bedrest and a "dog in the plastic bubble" existence. Possibly the best, most productive approach to a shy dog is via reasonable obedience training.

Rather than open the can of worms that is the discussion of dog training methodology , let's just say this: you are in this for results. There are many "psychoanalytical" approaches to training which will make you feel very good about your insight into your dog's psyche, but which will have you and your shy dog living in a proverbial bunker. Likewise, there are many "academically sound" methods of reconditioning a shy dog which will take months, sometimes years, to reach their potential, and which will usually cost you dearly in terms of time, patience and money. It is entirely up to you which approach you take. But for the sake of your dog, please try to remember his canine code of behavior: "Show me".

Your trainer should be willing to discuss all possible outcomes of the work with you. He should be able to refer you to happy clients whose dogs' behaviors were at least as extreme as yours. He should encourage you to have realistic goals: these should not include hiding your dog forever from reality, nor should they include a guaranteed social butterfly in every situation. Whatever

methods and tools he embraces, they should be geared toward the future ability to predict and control the dog off lead in your home, at least. If the word "only" is espoused in his training philosophy ("positive only", "we only use head halters", "prong collars only") be very careful. The total embrace of one tool or approach has hurt many more dogs than it's helped. If you like the odds that your dog will come out on the good side of that ledger, it's your decision.

Do treats and petting have their place? Absolutely. But just as good timing is necessary in delivering a correction, it's equally important in the delivering of a reward. A mistimed pat or treat may imply to the dog that the very thing you're trying to eradicate is actually his ticket to the goody train. Working with an experienced, balanced trainer who understands this is imperative. Timing and intuition cannot be learned from a book, a seminar or even a college course. A trainer who has worked with hundreds or thousands of dogs is likely to have met with a number of dogs like yours, and can help you cut to the chase and learn the best approach and schedule of reinforcement for your dog and situation.

Does medication have its place? Again, absolutely. As with any aberrant behavior, extreme shyness in a dog should be examined medically before undertaking a training regimen. Vision and hearing problems, brain tumors, seizure disorders; all are potential contributors to extremely shy or defensive behavior. Likewise, if you are dealing with a genetically shy or sharp-shy dog, the intelligent use of behavioral meds may be very helpful, along with a corresponding behavior modification program. This is between you and your vet, who will usually refer you to a behaviorist. Finding a behaviorist who actually trains dogs is difficult. Finding a trainer who can adapt your behaviorist's suggestions into real world training will be somewhat easier.

What is the place of obedience training in rehabbing the shy dog? Simply put: confidence building. Dogs do not become confident through human explanation, as we learned from Mary and Boo. Having consistent, calm direction from their two-legged "pack leader" is usually the most glaring omission in the life of a shy dog. Learning how to teach and reinforce the "Basic Five" obedience commands (heel, sit, stay, down, come) is one of the best things you can do for your shy dog. Rather than practicing them once a week in the obedience class and then only breaking them out when you're in crisis mode, learn how to utilize the Basic Five all the time: in your house, in your own back yard, at the vet's, in the car, on walks, etc. Contrary to what most pet owners think, this doesn't make a dog a mindless, unhappy robot. Instead, it makes him trust in his owner's judgement, and gain confidence in his own ability to deal with even scary situations. Again, no amount of training will totally change a dog's temperament or personality. But by giving him another option besides defense or flight, it certainly can change his reactions to situations where that personality seems to be at its full blown worst.

### **Your dog is YOUR dog**

Based on everything you've read, perhaps you're feeling a little more confident yourself, now! Time to sign up with that good trainer for some lessons. Dust off those walking shoes and start taking your shy dog out into the real world. Determined to "show" rather than "tell", you've got a whole new outlook about this stuff. Well that's great! But before you and your shy dog go out to conquer the universe, let me remind you of this:

Your dog is YOUR dog. You may never have that goofy, friendly, social butterfly you hoped for. Likewise, you will probably not end up with a modern Rin Tin Tin who knows how to bite a bad guy and guard a wayward toddler. It ain't gonna happen. Your shy dog will almost always have suspicion of strangers. He will quite possibly never want your friends and neighbors to physically touch him. And that's OK. He's YOUR dog. Not your friends'. Not your neighbor's. He needs to hold it together and accept physical attention from you, any household members, and your vet. And that's it. Expecting a shy dog to change dramatically will only disappoint you in the long run. He may, through the steps addressed in this booklet, learn how to be approached and greeted by a few core people. But remember that every time you introduce him to a new situation, environment or person, that you are back at Square One and must act accordingly.

Stop letting strangers pet your shy dog. For every careful, respectful person who follows your directions to the letter, there will be a person who moves erratically, who disregards your suggestions about approaching, or who puts his face immediately in your dog's face. If a stranger asks if he can pet your dog, thank him for being so considerate. Then explain that your dog is currently in training and prefers to be admired without being touched. Be very careful of the idiot who assures you that she "has a way with dogs" or " a way with animals". If she did have a "way with dogs" then she would never trespass on their personal space without your permission: space is a resource every normal dog respects about every other dog. You will undoubtedly run across some folks who think that your dog is a terrible creature if he is not approachable and pettable by a stranger. Try to let these people stew in their delusions about canine reality. You and your dog know better. When someone approaches me and asks to pet a couple of my dogs, my response is usually, "I appreciate your asking permission, And actually, I'd rather you didn't pet this guy. He's in training right now." If you're working with a good trainer, he should be able to help you determine if and when your dog is ready to be approached by a friendly stranger. You may never get to that point, and you have to accept that.

Shy dogs can be the most challenging to own. One must love them without pitying them, and one must bring them out into the world without overwhelming them. The happy, affectionate dog whose companionship you treasure may never show that face to anyone but you. It is up to you whether you view this as a gift or a burden. My advice is to accept it as both.

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