



Guide Dogs for the Blind

Building a Confident Puppy with R+

Guide Dogs for the Blind puppies need to be carefully socialized so that they grow up to be confident dogs capable of working in a variety of environments including busy metropolitan areas. The Puppy Socialization document and the Socialization Guide are important references for raisers. Some puppies may be less confident than others and many puppies will show caution of some things or situations as they develop. What is more important than a startle, or display of fear, is how quickly and how fully the puppy recovers back to a secure and confident demeanor. The raiser can help the puppy overcome its fears by supporting and handling the puppy appropriately. This document explains how to use counter conditioning and desensitization to change a puppy's fear response.

Fear may be to an individual object, noise, person etc. or the fear may be generalized. Following are some signs that a puppy may be fearful or stressed by a situation. More information can be found in the document "Raising Softer Puppies".

- Avoidance/unwillingness to approach/balking
- Lowered head/body
- Bolting away
- Hiding behind the raiser or an object
- Ears back or stiff and tense
- Tail clamped down or held under body
- Trembling
- Hackling
- Wet mouth or drooling
- Lips pulled back tight or 'puffing' at the sides
- Panting
- Licking lips or nose; a clear runny nose
- Refusal to accept food rewards or grabbing roughly at food rewards
- Rampy behavior (rushing/pulling to get out of a situation or get it over with quickly)

Two techniques that are used to change a puppy's emotional response (how it feels about something) are counter conditioning and desensitization. These two behavior modification techniques are used together to help a puppy overcome any negative feelings toward such things as:

- Novel or strange looking objects
- Surfaces
- Traffic
- Odors
- People
- Animals
- Noises

Desensitization is the gradual, controlled exposure to something that the puppy is concerned about. We reduce the puppy's sensitivity to something by habituating the puppy to the stimulus (the thing or event) at a very low level (as in sensitivity to a noise) or keeping a great distance from the object/situation at first. Over a period of time, as the puppy becomes comfortable at a low level, we increase the noise or movement or proximity, never going to the point where the puppy is made nervous. Eventually the puppy becomes "used to" the stimulus and ignores it.

Counter conditioning is the process of teaching the puppy to have pleasant feelings about something that it previously feared or disliked. This is done by pairing the stimulus with something the puppy enjoys - usually food, but a game with a toy can work too. Eventually the puppy will have a positive or neutral feeling about the scary thing or situation rather than reacting negatively toward it.

When puppies are being socialized these two techniques are actually being used proactively all the time by careful raisers. We only gradually expose puppies to busier situations and we use lots of food rewards for loose leash walking, calm behavior and ignoring distractions. As well as rewarding those specific behaviors, the rewards are promoting a positive association with being out in public.

For most GDB puppies this type of socializing will be sufficient but for some more sensitive puppies, or those that have had a bad experience, extra support may be needed. If a puppy shows more than mild, initial discomfort upon exposure to a new thing or situation, raisers should consult with their leader about how to help the puppy overcome its caution. Continuing to expose the puppy without a plan can actually compound the fear and make it much worse.

The "Three D's" of dog training not only apply to teaching behaviors but also to conditioning a dog to accept something it is reactive to or afraid of. Success will be attained if only one of the "D's" is increased at a time. In the case of changing fearful reactions we would look at:

- **Distance** - how far away the object is or how far back the puppy can be kept from a situation
- **Duration** - how long the puppy is exposed to the object or situation, this is especially important on first exposures to busy stores, streets etc.
- **Distraction** - in this case the stimulus that causes the puppy to be concerned. An object that is stationary is less frightening than an object that moves. An object that moves and makes noise is even more potentially frightening. Only one element should be added at a time when possible.

Steps in a Program

As an example of a training plan let's take a puppy that is afraid of a rolling garbage can. Depending on the pup's level of discomfort with the can, this process may take several days or several weeks. From the puppy's point of view we have three elements to the rolling garbage can - the object itself, the movement of the object and the noise as it rolls.

Phase 1

- The raiser should approach sufficiently close that the puppy notices the can but is not showing any fear.
- The puppy should not be forced to approach but if it wants to move closer it should be allowed to do so.
- The puppy should be liberally rewarded with food as soon as it looks toward the can.
- If the puppy refuses to accept the food or is uncharacteristically grabby for the food, the raiser should increase the distance away from the can. (Only the CFR can recommend high value food. High value rewards may be helpful with some puppies that have lower food interest generally.)
- Exposure should be for a short amount of time, thirty seconds or so at first, and as soon as the puppy is removed from sight of the can the rewards are withheld. This way the pup will realize that the presence of the can initiates the food reward.
- The above steps should be repeated several times, increasing the amount of time spent rewarding the puppy at a comfortable distance from the can.

Phase 2

- If the puppy is relaxed with the can at a distance for a minute or two, the raiser can approach a little closer.
- The puppy should receive a higher rate of reinforcement (more food) the closer it is to the can.
- Because the pup is closer to the scary object the duration of exposure should be decreased back to a shorter amount of time.
- When the raiser walks away from the object the food rewards cease.
- The above steps should be repeated over a period of time until the puppy can stand next to the can, cheerfully accepting food rewards.
- While the puppy is out of sight and earshot, the can should be moved to a new position and the above steps repeated.
- Only when the puppy approaches the can without hesitation and can remain in the vicinity of the can for several minutes without concern, is it ready to move on to the next phase.

Phase 3

A helper will be needed at this point. Preferably someone the puppy is familiar with. It would be best if the can is placed on a lawn or dirt to muffle some of the noise of it rolling. If noise and movement are added together it may be too much stimulus for the puppy.

- The puppy is kept at a good distance from the can. The person handling the can should speak to the puppy in a cheerful tone before gently and slowly moving the can away from or parallel to (not toward) the puppy. Rolling the can a few inches before stopping again will allow the pup to become accustomed to the movement a little at a time.
- The raiser should reward the puppy at a high rate as it watches the can.
- If the puppy is nervous it should be calmly moved further back from the can and the helper should keep the can more stationary.

- If the puppy wishes to approach the can it should be allowed to do so; the can should become still as the puppy approaches.
- Only a few seconds of exposure at first can be gradually increased until the puppy can watch the can moving for a minute or more.
- It may take days or weeks for the puppy to be comfortable watching a moving garbage can. Rewarding around a stationary can should continue but with less food reward than at first and less than when the can is “moving”.
- Only when the puppy is unconcerned about the moving can is it ready for the next phase.

Phase 4

Once again, a helper is needed.

- The puppy should be kept at a good distance, as in the initial introduction, as the can is now rolled gently in small increments on a hard surface.
- The addition of noise may make the puppy uncomfortable so distance away from the can may have to be increased and length of exposure decreased.
- The raiser should always start at a distance that the puppy is comfortable with and end the exercise while the pup is still relaxed and accepting food.
- If the puppy seems relaxed the raiser may approach more closely but the helper should decrease the amount of movement of the can as the puppy approaches.
- The rate of reinforcement should increase the closer the puppy gets to the can.

Using the above techniques the puppy should eventually happily walk by stationary garbage cans and at a further distance, moving garbage cans, *in that particular area*. However, dogs don't generalize well. Just because the puppy is no longer afraid of *that* garbage can in *that* area does not mean that the puppy will not be cautious of other garbage cans in other areas. The same techniques of desensitization and counter conditioning may have to be utilized in the future but will probably go much more quickly and smoothly once the puppy has been through the process with one garbage can.

Similar plans may be utilized for puppies that are afraid of other things, situations, surfaces and noises. In the case of noises, a desensitization soundtrack may be recommended to be played at very low levels while the puppy is eating or playing. The point is to keep the stimulus at a non-scary level upon introduction and pair it with something the puppy really enjoys. Eventually, upon seeing or hearing the stimulus that formerly caused the puppy discomfort, the pup should have a positive association and either ignore the stimulus or even become happy around it. At that time the food rewards can be decreased and eventually faded as no longer necessary.