



Guide Dogs for the Blind

Puppies with Sensitive Temperaments

Why we are seeing more sensitive puppies:

- Due to the change in our client base, the breeding staff has been striving to meet the demands of the training department for an easier to manage, more handler-sensitive dog. While being successful in producing that more biddable dog, the by-product is dogs that are more sensitive in general, including sensitivities to the environment. These puppies can be challenging to raise, but are very willing and easy for a visually impaired person to control as adult Guide Dogs.
- Our lifestyles are increasingly busy and active, leading to raisers inadvertently over-socializing puppies at a young age. (Please see updated socialization guide.)

Signs of stress:

Dogs exhibit stress in different ways. A puppy becoming uncomfortable may show one or more of the following signs. Many of these behaviors are seen in circumstances other than stress but if you see several of these behaviors together and/or repetitively, you need to consider if your puppy is stressed.

- Wet mouth or drooling
- Lips pulled back tight or 'puffing' at the sides
- Panting
- Licking lips or nose; a clear runny nose
- Yawning
- Head lowered
- Ears back or stiff and tense
- Lowered body and tail (tail may tuck in extreme fear or discomfort)
- Sweaty pads (you can often see a wet paw print on the floor); dogs sweat through their feet
- Not wanting to walk on the leash, balking (stopping, sitting or lying down)
- Unwilling to exit the vehicle or leave the house
- Loose or extra stools while on an outing or just after returning from an outing
- Whining/vocalizing
- Hackling (extreme, usually only when fear or suspicion involved)
- Sniffing, scratching, grabbing at grass/leash, escalating behavior (displacement activity)

- Rampy behavior (rushing/pulling to get out of a situation or get it over with quickly)
- Being irritated by the jacket /scratching at the collar
- Excessive licking or chewing on the paws (would happen more at school/office than outside)

Socialize slowly and positively:

Puppies do need to be exposed to novel situations but with sensitive puppies the areas must be chosen carefully. A good example would be to take your puppy to a new, quiet situation, let's say a library, a couple of times. Make sure it is very comfortable in that particular library and avoid the busier sections. Once it is comfortable there, try to find a different library where it is equally quiet and non-threatening and take him there a few times. Then perhaps go to the children's section in the library, being careful to keep him away from large groups of children. After a few exposures like this the puppy's next outing might be a quiet area in a friend's office. Try to find five novel situations per week of a similar level of difficulty, even if it just means visiting friends and relatives in their homes. Building up socialization like this will help build the confidence of a soft puppy. Pairing these exposures with a high rate of reinforcement (multiple food rewards or even whole meals) will condition the puppy to enjoy such outings.

Remember the rules of socializing a softer puppy:

- Go slowly with the socialization but do get the puppy out (review the socialization guide). There is plenty of time to work on building confidence but if you push the issue and create a fear it may be difficult or impossible to counter-condition that fear later. Use some of the pup's meals to reward calm behavior on outings.
- Avoid overly stimulating environments or situations that require firm control (greeting numerous people/toddlers, etc.). Don't let the puppy get overwhelmed or over-stimulated by people wanting to pet it. Politely explain to people that the puppy is in training and carry it or walk it away in a calm manner. This would be a good opportunity to practice the Hand Tether exercise with lots of food rewards. You may even need to utilize the "Emergency Lure" technique.
- By avoiding over-stimulating the pup you are setting it up for success. Softer puppies should be handled positively as corrections just add to their stress. Don't insist on perfect obedience from softer pups; let them explore the world on their own terms. Keep control with a headcollar.
- Watch for opportunities to reward and praise the puppy. Use positive puppy raising - make sure you are emphasizing what the pup is doing right and prevent unwanted behaviors.
- Do quick 'in and outs' rather than taking the puppy shopping. Have a second handler who can take the puppy off to a distance or stay outside

the store if it may be too overwhelming for the pup. *There is nothing wrong with leaving the pup at home if you are in doubt!*

- When working with softer puppies stop while they are still confident; don't keep pushing them until they have a negative reaction. Take small steps, even if it means it takes much longer to socialize the puppy.
- Don't go back to a place where a puppy had a negative reaction; avoid that area and work on building the pup's confidence in other areas for weeks or months before attempting to re-visit that particular situation.
- Praise and reward the puppy when it is showing confident behavior and support it when it is insecure. Make the situation easier for the pup by putting more distance between the puppy and whatever is making it uncomfortable. Equally, never force a puppy to approach an object or situation that it is afraid of. High value food rewards may be more appealing to the puppy in challenging situations – seek permission from your leader/CFR to use food rewards other than kibble.

Relieving Issues:

- Softer puppies are more likely to develop relieving issues.
- Extra care must be taken to follow relieving protocols and guidelines with sensitive puppies.
- If a puppy has an accident in a business or store do not go back to that store for months and be very careful (quick in and outs or staying at the entrance) in similar stores.
- Increase walking distances very slowly with softer puppies due to the increased potential for accidents which then become habits.

Avoidance of the puppy jacket:

Puppies who are stressed or nervous when out and about may avoid having their jacket put on as they begin to associate the jacket with being taken out in public. Sometimes it is hard to tell whether the puppy is just body sensitive, and finds the jacket uncomfortable, or if it is indeed making a negative association with the jacket and stress occurring outside the home. Consult with your leader/CFR for help in figuring this out and for recommendations to overcome this issue.

Balking Puppies:

- Practice collar cues and loose leash walking around the home before venturing out. Puppies who understand leash cues are much less likely to balk.
- Reward frequently with food (as in loose leash walking practice) to keep the experience positive for the puppy. Do not lure the pup but mark and reward for any steps forward at first.

- Younger pups: carry them away from home/vehicle and let them walk back. Then go to carrying them some distance away from home/vehicle before putting them down to continue walking away.
- Use a mentor dog (an older, calm pup or dog with a confident demeanor) but wean off as soon as the pup is comfortable.
- Let the pup carry a favorite toy to 'parade'.
- Build up distance and distractions on walks slowly - too much too soon, or too noisy/scary can create an unhappy, balking pup.
- Use the leash gently and let the soft puppy have more freedom to explore.
- Don't make too big a deal of scavenging tendencies. Try to prevent picking up of leaves etc. but don't scare the pup by grabbing at it. Practice the ground tether and hand tether exercises with distractions on the ground. Some pups may relax and stop diving at things if they have their own toy to carry.

At Meetings:

- Enter gradually. Stay off to one side of the activities or group.
- Be aware of the potential for over-stimulation.
- Stay in a corner and do puppy handling and/or fun, highly reinforcing games like ground tether.
- Do not do layovers in a group situation with an insecure puppy or make it do anything that may be too dominating or stressful. This may mean not participating in obedience exercises for a while.
- Only do obedience exercises that your pup is very familiar with and does easily at home. Lower your criteria and demand less of the pup at meetings. This doesn't mean you let the pup get out of control; set the puppy up for success and use distance and ample food rewards to keep the puppy's focus.
- Be careful about trading off to other handlers. Practice trading, but make sure the other handler is familiar with food reward techniques and does not push the puppy beyond what it is comfortable with.

General Handling for the Sensitive Puppy:

- Contact your leader immediately if you have concerns about your puppy being 'soft' or insecure. If in doubt, ask for advice on how to proceed. Occasionally, you may even be advised to just keep your puppy home for a few weeks to give the pup an emotional break.
- Only do puppy handling when the puppy is relaxed; keep handling positive and gentle.
- Practice a lot of food reward for calm behavior - this helps confidence too.
- Emphasize positive puppy raising. Reward good behavior frequently. Manage the puppy so that you avoid having to correct it as much as possible, especially when it is young. A crate or x-pen at work may be better than a tie-down.

- Do not correct a puppy that is vocalizing due to insecurity; distract it or move it further away from activities to a quiet area. Practice crate training and tie down behavior in quiet settings with a high rate of reinforcement (food rewards).
- Utilize the headcollar to control the puppy when not actively working on collar cues or loose leash walking.
- Above all, set the puppy up for success and train positively, rewarding appropriate behavior rather than trying to correct inappropriate behavior.

Raising sensitive puppies takes patience and skill. Puppies lacking in confidence can be complex and in some ways, are more challenging than those pushy, naughty puppies. Reserved puppies are more dependent on their raisers for support and need thoughtful, attentive handling. But the rewards are huge as you see the pup grow in confidence daily and get ready for the challenges ahead as a working guide.