

PUPPY TRAINING

Fear of Loud Noises

Firecrackers, thunder, and other loud, out-of-nowhere sounds often leave dogs frightened and wanting to flee to a safer place. These types of fears may develop even though your dog has had no traumatic experiences associated with the sound. The good news is that 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. Unfortunately, escape and/or destructive behavior can be a problem for you and could also result in physical injury to your dog.

What you can do to help?

- **Create a safe place**

Try to create a safe place for your dog to go when she hears noises that frighten her. Pay attention to where she goes or tries to go when she is frightened and, if possible, give her access to that place.

- **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. Give her a lot of praise and treats for paying attention to the game or the commands.

- **Behavior modification**

Teach your dog to respond in non-fearful ways to sounds and other stimuli that have previously frightened her. These techniques must be implemented very gradually.

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- 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 at any time while the tape is playing, STOP. Begin your next session at a lower volume -- one that does not produce anxiety -- and proceed more slowly.

For some fears, it can be difficult to recreate the fear stimulus. For example, thunder is accompanied by lightning, rain, and changes in barometric pressure and your dog's fearful response may be to the combination of these things and not just the thunder.

What NOT to do

- Do not attempt to reassure your dog when she is afraid. This may only 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 fearful 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.

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

