

Ask Cheryl

Animal behavior tips



This week:
The Cat Magnet

Q My dog is really terrified of noises. It can be anything - something dropped in the kitchen, the vacuum cleaner, and kids playing top the list. He jumps at the noise, starts to shake, and runs like a crazy dog to hide. The really weird thing is that now my cat is starting to do the same thing. What's making my animals so paranoid?

A Sudden noises can make anyone jump, but some animals are more sensitive to noise than others. Your dog hasn't had the opportunity to see that noises are not a bad thing, and your cat is picking up on the dog's anxiety. The cat may have been in the path of the dog when he ran from a noise. As far as the cat is concerned the dog becomes a raving lunatic who barrels small innocent cats over when there is a noise, so noises are bad! Usually working to desensitize the animal to noises is the best plan of action. We are entering into thunderstorm season, so this is a good time to work on the noises related to a storm. With storms, some dogs key in on the barometric changes. There's not much you can do about that, but if you can show your animals that there is nothing to fear from the sound, you've got a great start.

The following are some steps to take to help your dog learn that noises aren't all that bad. You can use this with the cat as well, but I suspect that once the dog calms down, the cat will too.

1. Go around and make a recording of different noises in the house that particularly bother your dog-it sounds like you have plenty of choices. If you don't have time to make a tape of noises, one can be obtained at www.dogwise.com. Search for Terry Ryan's "Puppy Habituation" CD. There are children playing, vacuum cleaners, thunderstorms, dogs barking and much more. Even if you don't have a dog with a fear of noises, this is a great way to help a pup learn that noises are no big deal.

2. Play the sound tape at a low volume to start. (Very low if your dog is really scared.)

3. Ignore the dog while the tape plays.

4. Do not try to soothe your dog by saying its o.k. Just quietly observe the dog's behavior.

5. Look bored if your dog stares at you for reassurance. Yawn-this is a calming signal that will tell the dog through your body language that all is well. Act casual.

6. If the dog becomes disturbed, try playing with your dog. If the dog is still scared, quietly turn off the tape and continue to act casual ignoring the dog. Try again later with the tape even quieter to start.

7. Only turn up the sound on the tape when the dog begins to relax at the current level.

8. Be sure to play the tape in different rooms so the dog doesn't associate the sound with a certain room.

9. Play games that your dog enjoys while you are playing the tape. You can play the tape quietly as the dog eats dinner (only if the dog isn't too disturbed by the noise).

10. Have the dog do sits, downs, stays, and comes--any of the training your dog knows. If your dog doesn't have any training, now is a great time for a class. Inform the instructor that your dog is working on a fear of noises and perhaps class will include some desensitization instruction.

Training and socialization in the beginning of life is a great way to head off many behavior problems. People often wait until a problem arises before they train their dog. Training from the first day your dog comes into your house is important. English is a second language to dogs and they aren't issued a manual on how to behave in a human world. It is up to use to teach them canine good manners. Dogs do what dogs do until shown a different way to behave. A fear of noises may have developed due to a negative experience, but it's also important to remember that fears develop from lack of experience. Socialize your dog. Get him out of the house and around lots of different experiences in the world. Start small and build your dog's skills from there. Classes are a great way to learn how to teach your dog some basic skills, but training doesn't stop there. Take the time to teach your dog how to use those skills in different ways throughout the day. Don't wait until there is a problem - start training today!

For more info on classes in Palmyra go to www.fluvannadogs.com or contact Cheryl for private sessions.

Cheryl Falkenburry has been helping people solve mind-boggling animal behavior problems for over 20 years.

Send your questions and stories to:

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Questions selected for use on the air or in the paper will receive a free e-mail or phone session with Cheryl.

Caring for Creatures Pet of the Week



Pippin

I'm Pippin, one of the dogs here at Caring For Creatures, and this is my story.

Life hasn't been easy for me so far. I was probably someone's hunting dog at one time and somehow became a stray. That's actually very common in the hunting dog world. Just visit any of the area shelters and rescue organizations and you will find a high number of hounds and hound mixes. Most of us are in poor medical condition - emaciated, covered with fleas and ticks, and heartworm positive.

I was luckier than most. I was found early on and taken to the local SPCA. From there I was transferred to Caring For Creatures. As soon as I came here, I could tell things were going to finally start turning around. And boy, was I right! Even though I still don't have a family, I feel like I belong here. There are so many friendly faces to meet. I get to play with Tango, my kennel mate, and nice people come to see me every day. I keep hoping to find a real home some day, but the big difference now is that I don't have to worry what will happen until then. I know I can live here as long as I need to.

I'm a pretty girl with a sweet and friendly personality. I love to play and go on walks. I've already been spayed and am up to date on vaccines. I would love to meet some nice folks to show them that hounds are special and deserve a wonderful life too.

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