

The Look of Fear in Dogs

By Sherry Woodard

Dogs vary in their basic approach to the big wide world: Some have a “bring it on” attitude and others are fearful. A dog’s body language will change as he becomes fearful. What does a fearful dog look like?

- His ears will be flat if they normally stand up or will lay back against his head if they are normally floppy.
- Her tail will be down low or tucked under her body, between her legs.
- He will hold his head down; he may try to avoid eye contact.
- Her body will be tense and will sometimes tremble.
- He may urinate or defecate as you approach.
- She may try to hide or run away.
- He may exhibit excessive drooling, panting or yawning.
- She may offer threats to try to scare you away: She may become motionless or stiff, show her teeth or lunge at you.



A dog with healthy behavior has the following characteristics:

- She is friendly with adults and at least tolerant of children.
- He can be handled by you and other people, such as the veterinarian, the groomer or a stranger giving a casual hello.
- She is friendly with other dogs and plays well with them while young (of course, she may play less as she gets older).
- He relinquishes control of food and other objects, such as toys, without any guarding behavior, like growling.
- She is affectionate without being too needy. She can be left alone for reasonable periods of time without any dire consequences.

It’s possible to work with fearful dogs so they can become adoptable. When working with a fearful dog, be extra gentle and patient. Some may always be shy around new people and new places, but with patience and understanding, a good home can be found.

Use caution while getting to know fearful dogs. If you have not worked with dogs before, you may need help to start building trust and a respectful relationship with a fearful dog. Fearful and shy dogs benefit from being around behaviorally healthy dogs, who serve as role models. The fearful dogs watch and learn.

Training is also helpful to fearful and shy dogs, since learning basic cues and agility builds their confidence. Simply going out in public places to socialize will help fearful

dogs to become more confident and gregarious. You might invite your friends (who are strangers to the dog) to offer small food treats to teach the dog about the pleasant rewards of interacting with people.

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See also: Submissive Urination
 Fear of Thunder and Other Loud Noises
 Dog Body Language