

Fearful and Shy Dogs— Has This Beagle Been Really "Abused"?

Have you ever experienced any of the following with a beagle? You approach the dog to pet him/her and it cowers, you accidentally drop a pan and the dog runs away terrified by the noise, out on walks he/she hides behind you when strangers approach or panics when children are near.

When these behaviors occur, it is easy to think instantly, "This poor beagle has been abused!" However, are these behaviors really the result of "abuse"? More than likely the beagle has been either under-socialized or not socialized properly.

Unfortunately many beagles have not had a good start from the get-go. They may suffer from poor breeding in a puppy mill or by a backyard breeder, or being raised by a hunter who relegates the dog to living in a backyard kennel, or simply being purchased by people who do not know how or have the time to socialize the puppy properly. Without early socialization these puppies mature into adults who lack confidence and the ability to cope with everyday experiences, often resulting in behavior problems that lead to the dog being surrendered to a shelter/rescue.

First, consider genetics, which have an impact on the temperament of puppies. Poor breeding, where the outcome is quantity rather than quality, results in puppies who are predisposed to issues with their temperaments. A fearful and shy bitch passes those traits on to her puppies. Already from birth those puppies have a strike against them in their ability to mature into well-adjusted adults.

Second, the importance of early socialization of puppies cannot be stressed enough. Puppies have a primary socialization period, which starts at three weeks and ends at three months of age. The secondary period starts at four months. During these periods, to ensure proper socialization a puppy needs to be exposed to all kinds of people, other animals (including dogs outside their own breed), new environments, situations and things.

What happens when dogs are not properly socialized? They become extremely shy and fearful, do not like to be handled, startle easily, have reactions to loud noises and quick movements, and are extremely fearful of new things including environments and people. The extreme result is that these dogs become unpredictable. Some are fear biters; others are bolters trying to run from anything that scares them. Trish King, Director of Behavior and Training for the Marin Humane Society, stated in a recent seminar, "In animals, fear is more powerful than pain."

So how do we recognize a fearful dog? Fearful dogs usually lean backward squatting with the bulk of their weight on their rear legs, the tail is lowered or tucked under their body, ears are back, and they may display “whale eye” where you can easily see the whites of the eye. Dogs may or may not growl, bark or put their hackles up. Dogs growling and barking while backing away are displaying fear.

We think of beagles as being soft, wiggly, fearless, happy-go-lucky lovers of life, people and other animals. Witnessing a fearful beagle is truly heartbreaking to beagle lovers.

Because fearful and shy dogs pull at our heartstrings, there is a tendency to coddle or baby the dog, reassuring him/her that everything is OK. However, this only reinforces the fearful behavior and does not build the confidence fearful dogs so desperately need.

Dr. Patricia McConnell has written a very helpful pamphlet titled *How to be the Leader of the Pack...and Have Your Dog Love You for It!* In the pamphlet she states:

Dogs need to feel secure to be truly happy; that means they need to feel secure that you will be the leader, and that they can count on you to take charge. But being the “leader” is often misunderstood. It doesn’t mean that you forcibly dominate your dog. Rather leadership is more of mental quality, in which you set boundaries without intimidation.

As guardians we need to meet our beagle’s needs. By providing the leadership our dogs thrive on, we help them develop the confidence to cope with everything life has to offer them and to be a loved family pet.

To learn about helping fearful/shy dogs please read the following:

Help for Your Fearful Dog: A Step-by-Step Guide to Helping Your Dog Conquer His Fears by Nicole Wilde, CPDT

The Cautious Canine—How to Help dogs Conquer Their Fears by Dr. Patricia McConnell

How to be the Leader of the Pack...and Have Your Dog Love You for it! by Dr. Patricia McConnell

On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals by Turid Rugass

Unleash Your Dog’s Potential: Getting in TTouch with your Canine Friend (DVD) by Linda Tellington-Jones