



Be Dog
Smart

Building Confidence Around Dogs

Handy tips and advice for all the family on how to build confidence around dogs.



**Millions of people
have dogs as pets.**

In fact, there are over 9 million dogs in the UK and this number continues to rise.

Supporting your child

At Dogs Trust, we understand not everyone is comfortable being around dogs and we know some people may also be scared of them. This can impact a child's life, from not wanting to play in the park or visit friends, to being worried about walking down the street in case they see a dog.

In this booklet you'll find handy tips and practical information to help your child build their confidence around dogs and keep safe when out and about.

Read on to find out how you can support your child.

What is fear?

Worry and fear are normal and are important for protection. A certain amount is good as it keeps us safe and stops us from going head first into situations we shouldn't.

Fear's 'job' is to protect us from immediate danger. When the fear response is triggered, it's like a fire alarm, which goes off to alert us to danger – our "fear alarm". When our fear alarm goes off, neurochemicals are released into the body which triggers our 'fight-flight-freeze' response and prepares our bodies to defend themselves. For example, our hearts beat faster to pump blood to our muscles so we have the energy to run away or fight off danger. When we freeze, we hope we may not be noticed, allowing the danger to pass.



Once the fear chemicals have been released into the body, there is nowhere for them to go. This may lead to things like a headache, tummy ache, shaking and increased heart rate. This is called anxiety. Sometimes however, we can feel those anxious feelings without a real threat in front of us. If you have a fear of something such as dogs, which you can see all the time, this can have a debilitating impact on day to day life.

Many people are fearful or afraid of something: from spiders and snakes to stickers and buttons. No matter how obscure or silly it may seem, fear is not something to be dismissed as irrational and should be treated appropriately. Cynophobia, or fear of dogs, is an extremely common phobia.

It is important to know how to handle this fear to keep yourselves and others safe. In this guide we set out to do just that, providing the whole family with help and advice on how to manage a fear of dogs.



The 5 most common reasons for being afraid of dogs

1

Bad experience with a dog



2

Learnt behaviour from parent or other relative/friend



3

Behaviour of a playful dog i.e. barking, jumping up, running around

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4

Cultural differences

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5

Influence of the media.

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Fear can come in all shapes and sizes.

What level is your child's fear?

HIGH

Fear interferes with everyday functioning and life

Picture of a dog leads to immediate anxiety response

Seeing a dog leads to an immediate anxiety response

Afraid to be in the same room as a dog

Afraid of larger dogs, but ok with other smaller or more placid dogs

Uncomfortable around dogs but okay if they are at a safe distance

LEVEL OF FEAR

LOW

You may want to seek professional advice if your fear level is medium to high. See page 10 for extra advice.



"Everyone can experience the feeling of anxiety at times."

How to build your child's confidence around dogs

Anxiety consists of an overestimation of danger and an underestimation of coping. We want to approach anxiety rather than avoid it, avoidance reduces anxiety temporarily, but continued avoidance can worsen the problem. Approaching it shows us we can handle the situation and our anxiety loses its control over us.

Encouraging children to open up about their fears and worries is helpful, along with teaching them about what anxiety is. Helping them recognise when they are experiencing it, and knowing what they can do to alleviate it, can also help manage it.

It is important to teach children that anxiety is not dangerous – it may go up due to a trigger, but it will come down again and eventually decrease. Viewing it like a ball – 'what goes up must come down' can be helpful.

Practical techniques to support your child

A number of factors contribute to anxiety – these include thoughts, feelings, physiology and behaviour. These can interact with each other and your child can experience negative thoughts, which can have an impact on emotions (how we feel), our physiology (how our body feels e.g. heart racing) and our behaviour (what we actually do).

Therefore, if your child is experiencing negative thoughts about dogs, altering those thoughts can lead to a change in emotion and a subsequent change in behaviour. This is how we can start to manage fear.



So what can I do?

- 1 Recognise how your child is feeling** through their body language – label how they are feeling and why – “I wonder if you are feeling worried because you can hear a dog barking nearby?” This will allow them to feel understood.
- 2 Give permission** for them to have their emotions/ experience – “that’s okay, I understand you are worried about the dog.” This gives a message that emotions are okay and useful things to have, it again conveys understanding.
- 3 Draw their attention** to the present and help them assess the situation in its reality or its safety, e.g. “that dog is on a lead and his owner is holding it.”
- 4 Help them recognise** when their body is talking to them or giving them clues as to how they are feeling, e.g. butterflies in tummy. Move them into thinking about what they can do to make themselves feel better e.g. breathing in together slowly for 5 seconds and out for 7 seconds.



5

Help them 'catch their thoughts' or try and identify their thoughts for them – "I wonder if you are thinking that the dog might jump up on you/bite you?" Or ask them "What are the thoughts that are popping into your mind about the dog? / What do you think the dog might do?"

6

Identify whether their thoughts are helpful or unhelpful.

7

Once you/they identify that they are having an unhelpful thought, ask them how they can **turn the thought** into a helpful thought i.e. "that dog is going to bite me" to "that dog is on a lead with his owner/ not all dogs bite/jump up."

8

Encourage them to be 'thought detectives' questioning their unhelpful thoughts, asking them questions such as: Is that really going to happen? Are there any times when you pass a dog and he doesn't jump up/bite? (i.e. you are looking for exceptions). Are you 100% sure? How/where have you experienced this?

9

Encourage positive thinking and model positive behaviour around dogs to help change their negative perception and response to dogs into a more rational and safe one.

10

Use a stepped approach to engage with dogs and change perceptions of them

- Talking positively about dogs
- Reading books with pictures of dogs in it
- Watching films where the leading star is a dog
- Role play: using small figures/toys to act out situations that your child finds frightening, and practise what they might do in that situation instead
- Build up to touching a dog whilst held in the arms of the owner
- Move on to spending time with dogs which are placid and calm.





Book a workshop

We offer free workshops for parents and children to ensure children and dogs can live together safely and happily. To find out about arranging one at your local school, just get in touch with your local Dogs Trust Education and Community Officer at www.learnwithdogstrust.org.uk

Need extra advice?

If you are looking for additional professional advice, this can be sought from your local GP, Local Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHs), School or Private educational and Child Psychologist, CBT therapist.

We have been given guidance by Olivia Kenneally BEd, H Dip App Psych, MEd, PG Cert Therapeutic Communication with Children, D.Ed.Ch.Psych, C Psychol, HCPC Registered Psychologist (Reg. No. PYL23251), a Child and Education Psychologist and CBT practitioner.

Dogs Trust Education and Community Officers have been given guidance on how to support children and their families manage a fear of dogs. If the fear is at a high level, or to overcome a fear altogether, further professional advice should be sought.



learnwithdogstrust.org.uk