

Understanding Fear Periods in Dogs

Dog Developmental Stages: What are Fear Periods in Dogs?

Why is Rover suddenly scared of strangers? This is often a question I get from dog owners who have pretty much owned a dog who cared less about being approached by a friendly stranger and now is cowering between the owner's legs. As I attempt to assess the situation and ask several questions, I place a strong emphasis on the dog's age. Why is that? Not many dog owners are aware of the fact that dogs undergo fear periods during their developmental stages. During these distinct periods dogs may gradually become more and more fearful of situations they once appeared to be accepting of. The fear may be manifested by overly cautious behaviors, where the puppy or dog approaches people or items tentatively or defensive behaviors involving barking/lunging/growling. In some cases, dogs may act bold towards certain stimuli and uncertain with others. However, it is important to note that **dogs can become fearful of specific things at any age** and no generalizations can be made. Let's take a look at these fear periods and see how they affect man's best friend.

First Fear Imprint Period: 8-10 Weeks

According to Meghan E. Herron, veterinarian and Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists, this first fear period takes place between the ages of 8 to 10 weeks. During this time, the puppy is very sensitive to traumatic experiences and a single scary event may be enough to traumatize the puppy and have life-long effects on his future behaviors. The fear can be of a person, dog or object. ***A fear period is therefore a stage during which the puppy or dog may be more apt to perceive certain stimuli threatening.***

In nature, during this time, puppies are getting out of the den and starting to explore the world around them. This is when puppies would learn under the guidance of their mom, which stimuli are threatening and non-threatening for the purpose of survival. At this stage, once they are fully mobile and outdoors, a lack of caution may cause them to easily get killed, explains Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist Patricia McConnell, in her book "For the Love of a Dog".

During the first fear period therefore it is important to **avoid exposing the puppy to traumatic experiences**. Shipping the puppy or allowing the puppy to undergo elective surgeries at this time is not recommended. Veterinarian visits and car visits should be made fun and upbeat. Stimuli and experiences puppies may find as frightening include but are not limited to: vaccines, cold examination tables, taking rectal temperatures, placing puppy on scale, nail trims and being handled by strangers.

How to Make Things Better:

- Use food to make positive associations!
- Have volunteers participate in "mock vet examinations" and use treats

- Practice giving "fake vaccinations" with a pen and use treats (for more on this read [how to make dog less fearful of shots](#))
- Make car rides fun!
- Have a DAP diffuser plugged in at home when you bring your puppy home for the first time.
- Make crate-training fun with toys and treats.

Second Fear Period: 6 to 14 Months

While the 8 to 12 week puppy fear period is in some cases hardly noticed by puppy owners, the second fear period appears to have a much bigger impact. Rover has grown now and if he is a large breed he may even weigh 100 pounds or more! **This fear period is believed to be tied to the dog's sexual maturity and growth spurts.** This means that in large breeds it may develop later compared to a smaller dog. Often, this stage is also known as "teenage flakiness" according Ellen Dodge in her article "Critical Periods in *Canine* Development" published in the Weimaraner Magazine. October. 1989.

In the wild, dogs at this age are allowed to go on hunts with the rest of the pack. At this stage, it is important for them to learn to stick with the pack for safety, but they also need to learn about fear since they need fear for survival purposes. The message to the puppy is to run away if something unfamiliar approaches them, explain Wendy and Jack Volhard in the book *Dog Training for Dummies*.

Reactivity levels rise during this stage causing the dog to act defensively, become protective and more territorial. Owners often report the fear seems to pop out of nowhere. Dogs appear fearful of novel stimuli or stimuli met before but that did not trigger significant reactions. **As in the first fear period, it is best to avoid traumatic experiences** during this time such as shipping dogs on a plane and any other overwhelming experience. Because at this stage the owner may be dealing with a dog barking and lunging and pulling on the leash, this fear period has a bigger impact, causing the owner to worry about the dog's behavior.

How to Make Things Better:

- Continue socializing as much as possible but without exposing your dog to overwhelming situations
- Create positive associations through counter-conditioning
- Build confidence through training and confidence building sports and exercises
- Avoid traumatic experiences during this delicate phase.

Is There a Third Fear Period?

Clarence Pfaffenberger, "author of *The New Knowledge Of Dog Behavior*" suggests there is a third fear period taking place in early adulthood. During this time, the level of aggression may increase and the dog may appear more protective and territorial. Episodes of teenage flakiness may still occur. Some believe there may even be a fourth period as the dog reaches early adulthood, but I couldn't find reliable literature on that.

General Tips for Dealing with Fear Periods

These tips will come handy to help you deal with your pampered pooch's fear periods. However, they also work for dogs who are fearful in general. While they are effective, keep in mind that your dog's tendency for being fearful may be the work of genetics rather than a temporary problem resulting from a fear stage. To learn more about how nature and nurture molds dog behavior please read: [Dog Behavior: Nature versus Nurture Debate](#) Following are some tips to help your puppy or dog get through these frightening fear periods:

- **Remain as Calm as Possible**

You can lie to your boss, but when it comes to dogs, they are masters in reading our emotions and body language. If you are overly concerned or just a bit tense about your dog acting fearfully or defensively, rest assure your dog will perceive it. Don't put tension on the leash, get tense or talk to your in worried manner. Stay relaxed and loose.

- **Pretend it's No Big Deal**

Your dog feeds on your emotions. Just as mother dog would take her pups out from the den and guide the puppies through threatening and non-threatening situations, manifest to your dog that the stimuli he fears is not a big deal. Some find that saying in a casual tone "It's just a _____(fill in the blank), silly boy!" helps the dog understand it's not a big deal.

- **Counter-Condition**

If your dog acts fearfully towards a certain stimuli you can try to change your dog's emotional response by using treats or anything the dog finds rewarding. The moment your dog sees the threatening stimulus give treats, the moment the threatening stimulus disappears take the treats away. The same can be done with sounds the dog finds startling, make the sound become a cue that a tasty treat is coming. What if your dog won't take treats? Most likely, the stimulus is too scary and the [dog is over threshold](#).

- **Don't Overwhelm, Desensitize!**

Work, under the threshold from a distance your dog or puppy does not react fearfully and is able to take treats. If you overwhelm and flood your puppy, you risk sensitizing your puppy which means you make him more fearful. Don't force your puppy to interact with the feared stimulus; rather allow him to investigate whatever he fears on his own and remember to praise/reward any initiative your puppy or dog takes!

- **Socialize, socialize, socialize**

Fear periods are part of a dog's developmental stages. The more your dog is exposed to stimuli and learns there is nothing to be scared about, the more confident he will be in the future when he will encounter anything intimidating. While the window of opportunity for [the puppy socialization phase](#) closes at around 14 to 16 weeks, socialization opportunities should virtually never end.

- **Don't Punish the Fear**

Last but not least, avoid punishing the fear. It appears that the majority of dog aggressive displays are due to fear; therefore, by punishing the behavior you will be only exacerbating the fear. Ignore the fear and let your dog build confidence by letting him investigate things on his own when he is ready and praising for the effort. Use force-free behavior modification such as [desensitization](#) and counterconditioning

While behaviorists have studied fear periods for some time, it is important to keep in mind that they may not occur within that exact time frame for each puppy. If your dog is going through a fear period, keep in mind that it is not the end of the world. With guidance, desensitization and **counter conditioning**, your puppy or dog should recover nicely with time.