



Suddenly spooked- Secondary fear phase in adolescent dogs

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If you have a puppy anywhere from around 6 months old to 18 months (and more!) and they suddenly spook at anything at all you will often be told by your doggy friends, with a knowing nod, 'oh, that'll be the secondary fear phase'.

Your teenage puppy may suddenly show fear, backing away or perhaps even barking at things they coped well with before- people with hats, flapping carrier bags, people on ladders, bikes and scooters, black or flat faced dogs etc are all top ten triggers.

Inanimate objects can suddenly become a source of terror!

But what is 'secondary fear' and what should we do about this sudden spookiness?

Secondary fear isn't very well defined in the scientific research and there's some debate about when it occurs (which is likely to be influenced by breed and genetics) and if it actually occurs. It's well reported though that dogs may suddenly (and hopefully temporarily) become more fearful about certain things.

Secondary fear is thought to occur anywhere between around 6 and 18 months old, during the period of social maturation where dogs change from puppyhood into adults. There are complex hormonal and neural changes that also occur around this time and sudden fear may well be linked to these physiological changes within the body. The primary fear centre in the brain, the amygdala, is enlarged at this time meaning that it reacts more sensitively to the environment and stress hormones are at their highest levels in adolescents.

In evolutionary terms, secondary fear also often corresponds with the time (around 8/9 months old) when older puppies of wild and semi feral dogs would have left their family group and ventured off alone into the big wide world. It is thought that a scary period at this time would protect puppies from venturing too close to things that could present a danger to them. Perhaps we still see throwback behaviour to this time.

Not all dogs will have a secondary fear phase and some dogs may have more than one (if you are unlucky!) It typically lasts between 1 and 3 weeks and needs careful handling as there is a risk that dogs may become permanently fearful of certain thing if they are exposed to a very traumatic experience at this sensitive time.

What should we do about it?

Don't force them to face their fears or immediately embark on a heavy duty program of socialisation. For example, if they showed fear towards tall men with hats, don't expose them to lots of very tall men in hats in close proximity. Space and time are what you need right now- let them see the things they are worried about but from a distance they can cope with and ideally give them several days after a 'scary incident' before you expose them to the same thing again.

We give them space from the things that scare them (perhaps on the other side of a road for example) so that your dog stays 'under threshold'- by this we mean they are in an emotional and physiological state where they can cope aren't so stressed that they are can't learn. Doing this gently and without stress is key so that we make good associations.

We give them time (at least a few days) so that they have chance to 'de-stress' and get back to normal before exposing them the stimulus again. Allowing time to recover avoids the effect of trigger stacking (where scary things add up together to result in a very stressed dog) and gives your dog a recovery period.

We always ensure that we don't make a big deal about the 'scary thing' - we never force our dog to approach the flapping bag/scary plant/person in high vis, we give the dog the choice if they'd like to approach and we watch their body language carefully to judge how they are feeling. We also counter condition around the 'scary thing' from a distance so we pair exposure to it with things the dog likes (normally food!). Counter conditioning takes practise to get right so consult a trainer or behaviourist if you need help.

Be careful not to lure towards trouble- as humans we are always tempted to get out dogs (and our children!) to face their fears but this isn't helpful. If we lure (with food in the hand) a dog towards a 'scary' bin/person/dog then the dog will follow the food towards the scary thing and may then suddenly become very worried when they realise how close they are. Luring then towards scary things also removes the dogs free choice, which is something that we believe is very important- to give our dogs choices.

TESTIMONIALS

"When we first met Laura and Penel, we were the proud owners of a 56kg



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[Avoid making it worse](#)– if you expose a fearful dog to something they are scared of in the wrong way, or too close, or for too long, or to a too scary version of the thing, then you risk making the dog MORE fearful rather than less scared.

[Do lots of low arousing, feel good activities to help get through a spooky phase.](#) Loads of scent work and Ttouch ground work is best and being around people and dogs that they know and like.

[Don't pick this time to start something new and potentially stressful.](#) I delayed starting Sylvi's hydrotherapy as she was in a fearful phase at 6 months old and showed sudden spookiness towards novel objects and people. So going to a new place, being handled by a new person, wearing a floating vest, being showered and dried etc would have been too much for her at that time. Two weeks later when she was back to normal we started hydro and she thrived.

[Think back to early socialisation- are there any gaps or things you didn't cover?](#) In winter puppies it's common to forget to expose them to sunglasses and summer hats and in summer puppies we can forget to get them used to big bulky coats and winter hats for example. Did you miss out mobility scooters and are they an issue now? If you've identified a gap then remedial socialisation is a great idea- don't be afraid to ask for help from a reward-based trainer or behaviourist to help you with this.

A fear of certain breeds of dogs can often overcome by remedial socialisation (Sylvi has no fear of flat-faced friends!)

[Check they are feeling okay- consult your vet is they are behaving out of character or if you see a sudden change.](#) Adolescence can mark the onset of some medical conditions so always rule out any medical cause (including pain) for behavioural changes. Fear and pain are strongly linked and can exacerbate each other. Don't assume that it's 'just' behavioural as they are young, it's crucial to rule out medical causes.

[If the fearful phase persists or gets worse then don't delay in getting help, all behavioural issues are easier to 'fix' if they have only recently occurred rather than behaviours that have been practised for months or years. With any luck though your normal \(whatever normal is!\) adolescent will return pretty quickly.](#)

Laura McAuliffe, Dog Communication 2016.

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CONTACT



Laura McAuliffe:
laura@dogcommunication.co.uk
07773 227789

Penel Malby:
penel@dogcommunication.co.uk
07831 173773

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