

Fear and Reactivity in Adolescence

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Is your normally stable puppy suddenly freaking out at every little thing? You've probably hit a normal adolescent fear imprint period. But worry not, with patience and counterconditioning training, you can help your dog feel more confident and safe in his surroundings.

What is the adolescent fear imprint period?

Puppyhood acceptance of everyone as a potential friend is replaced with "are you safe?" and "do you belong here?" You may see them shy away from people in hats, wearing sunglasses or carrying something. I often hear students exclaim, "He didn't recognize me!" Back-lit silhouettes are particularly alarming as the dog can't see your face. Someone entering a room unexpectedly may cause them to startle and bark.

Adolescent dogs may spook at the silliest things. You walk down the same street every day for months and one day, out of the blue, he becomes hysterical at the sight of a fire hydrant that has always been there. Your pup may become unable to enter his own backyard because there's a wheelbarrow parked in the corner that wasn't there before. Environmental contrast. They are on high alert when they perceive things aren't "normal."

Why does this phase of fear happen?

The degree of startle response depends on **early socialization**.

Dogs whose genetic heritage has programmed them to be alert and focused outward will often have a more pronounced fear period. Dogs with parents that are more alert or cautious will need increased positive socialization during adolescence.

For adolescence, it's almost like one day they can see better at a distance. Suddenly they are noticing the neighbor across the street as he gets out of his car. Their alarm starts with a suspicious "boof - boof" followed by "bowrrroooooo-roooo-rooo" going up in pitch. If this behavior is allowed to be practiced, their confidence in "scaring away **the mailman**" (he was leaving anyway) or neighborhood kids will increase. You don't want them to become experts in scaring the neighborhood, nor do you want them to continue being afraid and practicing unwanted behaviors because scary things are "too close."



Between 6 and 18 months your dog is in adolescence. Becoming an adult. Living in an adult body with a puppy brain. Your dog experiences emerging adulthood combined with conflicting feelings of insecurity. Sometimes your dog will look like Jekyll & Hyde. While some breeds are naturally more vocal than others, the problem is magnified in dogs with limited socialization. If they find out that lunging and barking will make the scary thing go away, they will add it to their repertoire of behaviors that work. Control the environment so they don't feel they have to defend themselves. Do not encourage "watch dog" behavior at this age; you are rewarding fear and suspicion not bravery and confidence.

Using socialization and counterconditioning training to help your dog overcome a fear period.

The more timid or unsure the dog feels, the more noise he may make. Watch for "distance increasing signals" such as: looking away from the scary thing, lip licking, paw raises, the whites of the eye showing or a tightly shut mouth with or without teeth showing. If you see any of these behaviors, move your dog away from the object or person they perceive as scary. We want your dog to continue "asking" for space this way without relying on growling, barking or lunging.



Young adolescent dogs pushed beyond their safety threshold frequently lunge and bark with hackles (the ridge of hair down the dog's shoulders and spine) raised or they may cower behind you and get very still. This behavior is designed to create distance between them and the scary thing. Socialization is the key! In other words, pair very high value treats with the dog seeing the thing they perceive as scary.

The good news is dogs may grow out of their adolescent fear period - with support and guidance from their pet parents. It is important to continue to expose them to new things at a very safe distance, where they are not reacting and still accepting treats. Avoid exposing them to a lot of scary things at once or at a very close proximity.

If your normally friendly dog suffers from a "sudden onset" of out of character behavior, there could be a medical reason. Thyroid imbalance or chronic pain, even allergies can cause dogs to behave out of their normal stable character. Do consult your veterinarian. This age and these behaviors can be difficult to manage, but San Diego Humane Society can help! **Call San Diego Humane Society's Behavior Helpline at 619-299-7012 ext. 2244 to speak with a trainer, or visit www.sdhumane.org to view our behavior and training class options.**