



Building confidence around dogs

**Tips and advice for the whole family on
how to build confidence around dogs**

Millions of people have dogs as pets.



In fact, there are around 12 million pet dogs in the UK*.

This guide aims to support people who would like to build their own confidence around dogs, as well as ways to support children with this.

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

In this booklet you will find handy tips and practical information that may help you to build confidence around dogs and stay safe when near them

Later sections specifically focus on ways to support children

* Pet Food Manufacturing Association (PFMA) (2021). Pet Population 2021 (<https://www.pfma.org.uk/pet-population-2021>)

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What is fear?

Fear and worry are normal and play an important role in protecting us. A certain amount is good as it keeps us safe and stops us from going into situations that we shouldn't.

Fear's 'job' is to protect us from immediate danger. When our fear response is triggered, it's like a fire alarm, which goes off to alert us to danger – we could call this our “fear alarm”. When our fear alarm goes off, neurochemicals are released into the body which trigger our ‘fight-flight-freeze’ response and prepare our bodies to defend themselves.

For example, our hearts beat faster to pump blood to our muscles so we have enough energy to run away or fight off danger. When we freeze, we hope we may not be noticed, allowing 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 have those anxious feelings without there actually being a real threat in front of us. If you have a fear of something such as dogs, who you might see regularly, this can have a debilitating impact on day-to-day life.

Many people are fearful or afraid of something: this can range 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 manage 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.

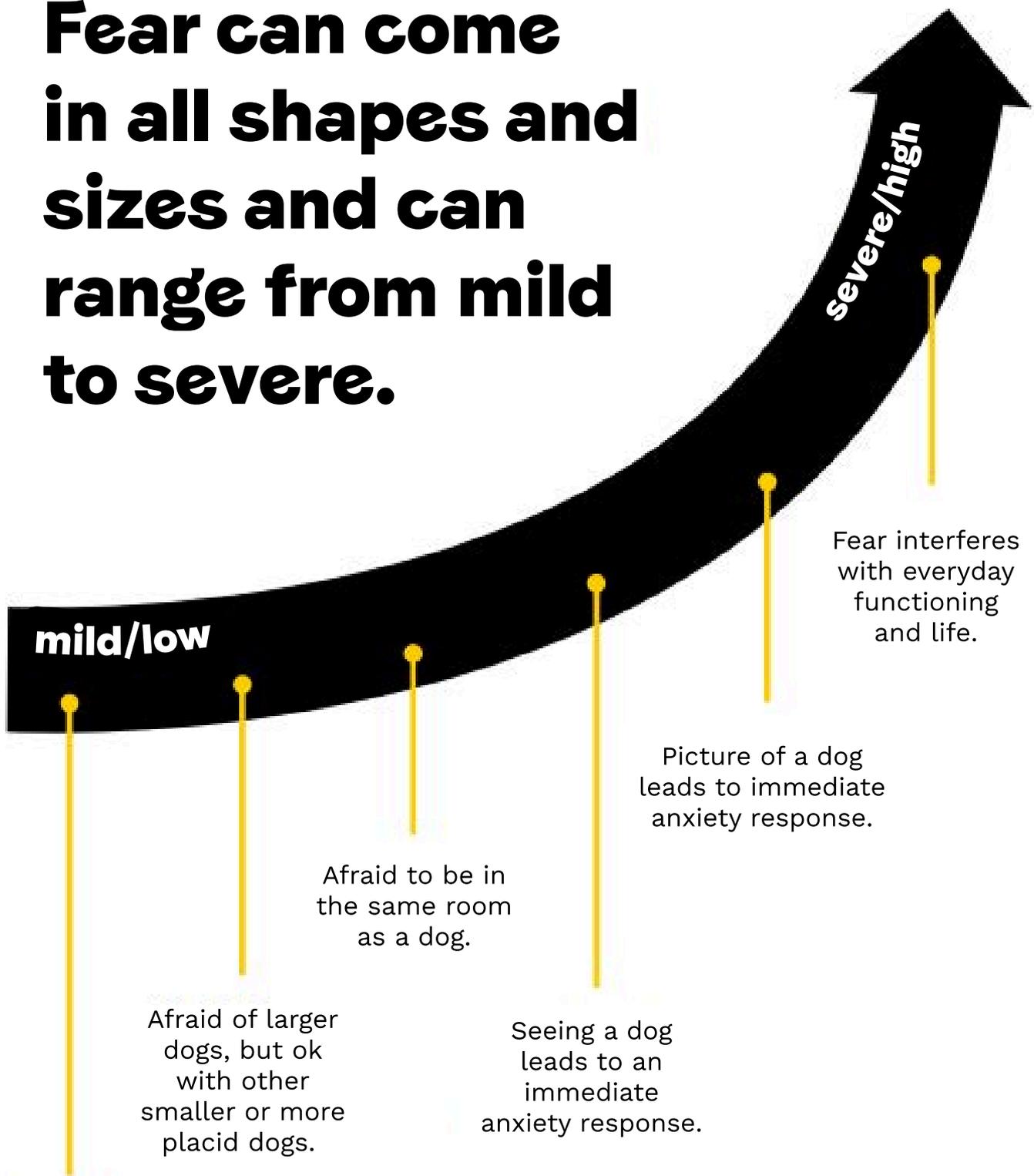
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There are lots of reasons that can cause somebody to be afraid of dogs:

- Past negative experiences with a dog**
- Learned behaviour from parents, relatives, friends, or others**
- Behaviour of a playful dog i.e. barking, jumping up, running around**
- Cultural differences**
- Influence of the media.**



Fear can come in all shapes and sizes and can range from mild to severe.



Uncomfortable around dogs but can manage if they are at a safe distance.

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

Afraid to be in the same room as a dog.

Seeing a dog leads to an immediate anxiety response.

Picture of a dog leads to immediate anxiety response.

Fear interferes with everyday functioning and life.

You may want to seek professional advice if fear levels are medium to high. See back page for extra information.

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



How to build 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.

Talking openly about fears and worries is helpful, along with developing an understanding of what anxiety is. Helping either ourselves or somebody else to recognise when anxiety is present, and knowing what can be done to alleviate it, can also help to manage it.

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



This section offers some practical techniques to help you 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 a 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.

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What can you 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 to have, it again conveys understanding.

3. **Draw their attention**

to the present moment and the situation in front of them. Help them assess the reality and risk, e.g., “that dog is on a lead and his owner is holding it, so you are safe.”

4. **Help them recognise**

when their body is talking to them or giving them clues about how they are feeling, e.g., butterflies in tummy. Guide 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.

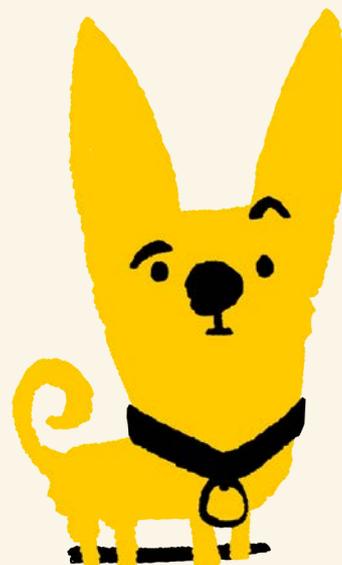
5. **Help them ‘catch**

their thoughts’

or try to identify their thoughts for them – “I wonder if you are thinking that the dog might jump up at you or 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 that into a more helpful one** i.e. “that dog is going to bite me” might turn into “that dog is on a lead with his owners” or “not all dogs jump up or bite.”
- 8. Encourage them to be ‘thought detectives’** questioning their unhelpful thoughts, asking questions such as: “Is that really going to happen?” “Have there been times when I have walked past a dog and they haven’t jumped up?”
- 9. Encourage positive thinking** and model positive behaviour around dogs to help change their negative perceptions and responses to dogs into more rational and safe ones.



10. Use a stepped approach to build your child's confidence around dogs like those below:

- Talking positively about dogs
- Reading books that have positive pictures of dogs
- 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
- Visit the home of friends or family who have a dog, without experiencing anxiety, even if there is no interaction with the dog.



It can also be useful to teach children to follow the 3 steps below if they are approached by a dog and they feel worried:

- **Stand still and stay quiet. If you have food or a toy, throw it away from you.**
- **Cross your arms and put them over your neck and chest.**
- **Look away from the dog. Wait for them to lose interest or until an adult comes to help.**



Understand more about dogs

To learn more about dogs and how they communicate with us, visit: [An overview of canine communication | Dogs Trust](#)

Free online workshops

We offer free online workshops for children about staying safe around dogs. To find out more about these workshops and learn more about dog safety visit:

[Dog safety workshops for children | Learn with Dogs Trust](#)

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, private Educational and Child Psychologists or a 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. PLY23251), a Child and Education Psychologist and CBT practitioner.

A dog is for life ®