



Training Expectations for Very Fearful Dogs

I recently adopted a 5-year-old small terrier mix from a local rescue. We named her Dixie. They told me that she was a breeder dog and when she was no longer producing good numbers in her litters, the breeder got her into the rescue. She is very fearful. She runs away from my husband and I and will only approach either of us when we are in bed at night. If she is cornered, I am able to pet her and pick her up but if my husband tries to do the same, she scrambles away and leaves a little pee as she is running away. We feel so sorry for her and can only imagine what abuse or mistreatment she has experienced to make her this way.

We are worried because if she were to ever get out, she would not come back to us when we call her. Also, we need her to learn 'stay' so she stops running away from us so we can get her when we need to. We are not expecting her to do all obedience exercises or even tricks, but we do need the safety commands. I am at my wits end and have no idea how to train her.

Can you help? – Bobbie

Hi Bobbie! I am sorry that you are experiencing frustration mixed in with so much compassion. Working with fearful dogs is really a long-term commitment. Dixie feels safe approaching both you and your husband when you are recumbent in bed at night because it is the least threatening position we can be in with dogs.

The first thing we need to do when we take on the commitment of a fearful dog is to adjust our expectations. She is not capable of learning come and stay as safety commands at this point. She is too busy trying to stay safe with every decision she makes. With fearful dogs, most everything is a potential threat. These dogs often have a two-fold problem. First, they often have a genetic tendency to have a very low fear threshold. Second, they have often had insufficient "proper" socialization to balance out that predisposition for fear.

It is easy to assume that these fearful dogs have had absolutely horrible experiences, but that does not always have to be the case. A genetic tendency toward fear along with a lack of appropriate socialization is enough to create what you are seeing. Finally, if there was any mistreatment or abuse, that would only compound the first two issues.

During domestication, the need for reliance on the 'pack' was transferred to a dependency on humans. Dogs who are dependent on humans are more easily trained. They are also more likely to blindly trust a human and approach assuming good things will happen.

For a dog to learn our “human” commands such as come and stay they must have a core trust in humans along with a clear mind to learn from the ‘behavioral flow chart’ that we humans establish. This is better called an “if/then” statement. “If you come to me then you will get a treat or touch or praise, etc.” “If you stay then I will approach you or then let you approach me for love, treats, praise, etc.”

These “if/then” statements assume that we have something the dog wants, and the dog eventually understands what he must do in order to get what he wants. It works beautifully with most all dogs.

But what is it that fearful dogs want more than anything? Safety. And if they don’t feel that humans provide safety, there is no easy path to that training. When we are fearful, our brains become “noisy” and we begin doing an endless loop of our own “if/then” survival scenarios. This is based on our need to escape harm and stay alive or to do whatever is necessary to reduce conflict. When dogs have a fearful “noisy” brain, they are not thinking of what they can do to get the treat. They are doing their own loop of survival scenarios to stay safe and reduce conflict. Often, this involves running and hiding. Just the opposite of stay and come.

Your first goal is to make your house safe to minimize primal escape attempts. Have double blockades at all points of entry and exit such as a baby gate blocking access to doorways. The same goes for being outside. Are there any places the dog can squeeze through if she is in a primal escape state? What about the gate? Is that secure and does that have blockades or a double entry system? In the house - take away hiding places such as under the bed or under other furniture where you won’t have access to Dixie. She can have clam shell beds or other enclosed beds where she feels safe, but you can still get to her.

When you are home and able to supervise her, you should have a dragline or a light leash that is four to six feet in length attached to her collar. This will allow you to gently pull and guide her out from some place you don’t want her to be. It will also allow you to step on the leash in order to pet her or treat her without her running away. These exercises will normalize your approach and your ability to physically guide her safely. This normalization will help her to build trust because of the relief she will feel when nothing bad happens during that interaction.

Often, even as dogs become less fearful, they still run. This is sometimes because they are in a ‘habit’ of increasing distance from something just in case that thing turns out to be a threat or is dangerous. Using a dragline will begin to break down that habit of running and instead allow your approach.

Are treats a good thing to use with fearful dogs? Yes, they are. I would suggest hand feeding her if that is possible. (Some fearful dogs will only eat at night when no one is

around.) If hand feeding isn't possible, then I would place a treat near her and walk away, allowing her to eat the treat when she feels safe.

There is a whole protocol of things to do and things to avoid when dealing with fearful dogs but to stick with your original question about teaching come and stay - this will have to be something you build upon. It will take a lot of time and patience. Dogs don't understand that come and stay keep them safe. These dogs are not accustomed to relying on humans and that is the first step in any training process - learning to rely on a person.

Be patient, don't try to lure her in or trick her with treats. That puts too much pressure on her. Have a dragline on when you are home (off when you leave or at night for safety) in order to be able to secure her or approach her. Deposit treats or hand feed in situations where she is not inclined to run from you. The focus should only be on building trust and helping her to allow you and your husband to approach her. The rest will have to come later.

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