



FIREWORK FEAR AND YOUR DOG

If a dog hasn't been safely exposed to many different experiences, including loud noises during his essential socialisation period (3 to 14 weeks of age), when he gets older he may not be able to cope with novel, frightening sounds like fireworks or loud engine noises. We also find that certain breeds of dogs seem to be more sensitive to noises than others and dogs that are generally anxious or unhappy will also find it much harder to cope. Left alone, noise phobias tend to get worse over time, rather than better, so you really do need to act to help your dog, if he's scared on fireworks night.

Even though the noise level is supposed to be controlled by recent law, there is little that can be done about the fireworks themselves, so sadly we have to learn to live with them. How can you help your faithful firework-phobic friend get through firework nights? Here are some tips:

- If your dog has only recently developed a sensitivity to fireworks or noises, try to **act as if there is nothing to be scared of** – jolly him along and praise him for responding positively.
- If your dog has a serious or long-standing phobia, **give him attention if he requires it** – he'll be too scared for this to act as a reward, so it won't encourage the unwanted behaviour and instead he will benefit from the comfort that this gives him. Essentially though, **try to find out what helps him to cope and be sure to let him do this** – e.g. letting him hide under the table – don't try to coax him out, if this is where he feels safest – he'll come out when he's ready and then you can praise him.
- At very noisy times around Bonfire night, **provide your dog with a safe hiding place** (a cardboard box would do) in his favourite room of the house, close the curtains and turn up the volume of your television or radio to drown out the firework noises. Remember not to shut any internal doors, as he may feel trapped and panic.
- **Don't leave your dog alone** in the house, as he may panic and injure himself.
- **A stodgy high-carbohydrate meal** (e.g. with well-cooked rice or mashed potato) in the late afternoon may help make your dog feel more sleepy and calm during the evening. Also make sure he goes out to toilet before it gets dark and the fireworks start.
- **Try to keep your dog busy** with games or reward-based training, to keep his mind off the noises.
- **Ask your vet about DAP** – Dog Appeasing Pheromone. This is a scent which you can't smell that comes in a plug-in diffuser, spray or collar that can comfort your dog and help him cope with his fears.
- For dogs with very severe fears on the worst nights, **your vet may be able to prescribe Diazepam**. This will not stop your dog from being scared on the night, but causes short term memory loss, so that he won't remember being scared in the morning. This stops the cycle of fear becoming worse, but it is important to do some training to lessen the problem for the next time. Other sedative drugs tend to make the problem worse.
- **Ask your vet about other drugs** – there are now several drugs available which reduce anxiety levels for dogs. They tend to take some days to have an effect so they cannot be used for short periods but they are often useful to help in the training programme outlined below.
- **Ask your vet about homeopathic remedies that may help** – such as Bach Rescue Remedy.

If fear or phobic reactions are severe or cause aggression in your dog, you must see a behaviourist or a vet, who may want to put your dog on a supervised or tailored desensitisation programme – but this will only work if you start long before the firework season begins. Remember that medical conditions can also cause phobias in your dog, so if he displays signs of phobia, it may be best to get him checked out anyway.

If your dog is healthy and his problem isn't too severe, you can try the following yourself (ask your vet for DAP or other drugs as this will make the following programme more effective). Please remember that incorrect use of this technique may make the problem worse, so proceed with caution. Try to start this programme at least a month before fireworks are expected:

How to help your dog overcome his fear of fireworks noise

The trick is to associate firework noise with something nice for your dog, so that he gets excited and happy, rather than scared whenever he hears it. You can do this by playing firework noise quietly and then gradually louder, whenever he is enjoying himself. Here's what you need to do:

Obtain a sound recording of fireworks noises. Several companies produce these. If you have any problems finding one, try the following:

- Sound Therapy 4 Pets Ltd - 01244 371 473 www.soundtherapy4pets.com
- Crosskeys Books – 020 8590 3604 www.crosskeysbooks.com

Now make a list of all the things that your dog loves in life and which produces natural excitement. A list may look like this:

- When you are about to feed your dog.
- When you get your dog's lead out prior to a walk.
- When a family member returns home, having been out without the dog.
- When you greet your dog first thing in the morning.

List as many things as you can.

Have your dog in the room with you, making sure he is quite relaxed and lying down. Do not make him lie down; wait until he does so of his own accord.

- Put your CD/cassette in the stereo and make sure the volume is set as low as it can be.
- Start the CD/cassette and watch your dog carefully. Slowly turn the volume up whilst watching your dog until he shows a sign that he can hear the noise by acknowledging it. This may be by lifting one ear or his head up, but under no circumstances should he show any fear behaviour. Then reduce the volume one notch.
- Mark the volume on your stereo and then switch it off.

For the next two weeks you will need to use the following programme:

- Every day, switch your stereo on at the volume which you have previously set, just prior to one of the events you have on your list that makes your dog naturally excited.
- Leave the recording running all the time the dog is naturally excited, switching it off again as the excitement dies down.

On completion of the above, the dog should be showing no fear when the CD/cassette is playing at the set volume, but instead should be associating the noise with the exciting events on your list.

Then the following should be done until your dog is happy and relaxed with the recording playing:

- Continue as above, but now gradually increase the volume on the stereo every day, linking this to exciting events on your list.
- If you reach a level on the volume that causes any fear reaction in your dog, do not turn the volume back down. Instead, mark this level and keep it at this volume for the next three to

four days. If there is still a fear reaction, reduce the volume quite a bit until there is no fear reaction and slowly work it up again.

If you have completed this programme successfully, the reaction you should expect from your dog when you play the noises is one of excitement behaviour rather than fear behaviour, as your dog now associates the noise with something about to happen that he loves.

If you experience any serious or aggressive reactions from your dog whilst using this programme, you must stop immediately and ask your vet to refer you to a behaviour specialist. If your dog was adopted from Dogs Trust, please contact the relevant Rehoming Centre directly for behavioural advice.

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