

# behavior modification protocols

One of a series of ASPCA® Behavior Modification Protocols developed by Emily Weiss, Ph.D., CAAB



## working with fearful/timid dogs

**Please note this protocol is not without risk.** The dogs that benefit most from this protocol are those who cannot be taken out of the cage for SAFER™ assessments due to their present state. This protocol should only be used with dogs that are cowering in the back of the cage but are not showing signs of fear aggression. (Conflicted dogs showing signs of fear aggression could choose to bite the moment you turn your back to them.) It is vital that the handler conducting this protocol has a solid understanding of canine behavior.

### program instructions:

- Sit in the doorway of the cage with door open and your back to the dog, with left arm behind the back with hand on the floor, palm up, loaded with a high-value treat.
- Sit still, talking to the dog without looking at him, waiting for him to eat the treat in hand.
- Once a treat is eaten, load up another one.
- Once the dog begins to "explore" handler – sniffing hair or ears, pawing at hand instead of running to the back of the cage – as the next treat is taken, touch the dog's chin or side of face with one finger.
- After a few repetitions, move to the sideways position, leaving treat hand at side.
- After a few repetitions in that position, bring the treat hand into your lap. Before you know it, the dog is sitting in your lap and ready to have a slip lead put on around the neck.
- Toss a treat away from you to get the dog off your lap and try to go for a walk.

With a dog too stressed to walk on a leash or for one that may have never been on a leash, it would be best for the dog to be on a buckle collar and leash rather than a slip lead that might tighten when he panics.

For dogs that freeze when they feel pressure from the lead we recommend that the leash be clipped to the dogs buckle collar while the dog is in his kennel. Disperse treats throughout his space so that he is likely to move about. Leave the leash on for a couple of hours so that he is likely to step on the leash and become used to pressure on and off around the collar. Be sure that he is monitored while wearing the leash in his run.

**when the dog is adopted:** Review the "Program for Fearful Behavior" instructions with the adopter which can be found in the Reproducible Forms and Templates section. Remember to follow-up with the adopter at three days, three weeks, and three months post-adoption.

### program for fearful behavior

ASPCA®

#### Congratulations! You have adopted a new family member.

As your adoption counselor discussed with you, your dog displayed significant fearful behavior, especially around humans, while in the shelter. What does this mean? It means that your dog may be more likely to exhibit fearful behavior around new people, places, and things. While we conducted a successful behavior modification program with the dog while he was with us, we suggest that you continue this work with the dog when you take him home. Fearful behavior is both treatable and manageable. We suggest you follow the plan below, beginning the moment your dog comes into your home.



#### the plan:

- **Be aware of your body language at all times with your dog.** Keep a sideways stance to your dog and avoid eye contact as a frontal stance and eye contact can increase his fearful responses. Be sure new people coming to your home are aware of their own body posture. Remember that a forward posture can communicate aggression to your dog and increase his fear.
- **Ignore all of your dog's fearful behavior.** By trying to help him through his fear by petting and talking to him, you'd actually be rewarding the behavior and increasing the likelihood of him repeating the behavior again in the future.
- **Keep tasty treats around your home, especially for the first few weeks living with your new friend.** You will want to give him treats when he approaches you, other family members, or decides to explore different rooms or items in your home. It is important for him to learn that something good happens when he chooses to explore novel people or things.
- **When strangers come to your home, give them tasty treats to give to the dog if he chooses to come over to sniff them.** If the dog chooses to not approach new people, he should be ignored.
- **If your dog is dog-friendly, arrange for him to go for walks with other dogs who will give him an added level of confidence on the street.**

If you are unable to do the preceding exercises, we suggest you choose another dog to adopt. While we cannot 100 percent predict the future, research does show that dogs who display fearful behavior in the shelter are more likely to display the same behaviors in the home. We want you and your dog to create a strong bond early on post-adoption and for your dog to have the opportunity to be able to work through his issues. Please take the time to ask yourself if you are ready to take on a bit of a project.