UK Spaniel Rescue

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Confidence Building Exercises

Playing games with your dog gives them something fun and meaningful to focus on. These types of games are good for dogs that are fearful or have anxiety because they give them a chance to learn something new without having to worry about consequences. In other words, it gives them something positive to focus on in the moment, rather than worrying about the environment around them.

Confidence building takes time, but the good thing about using games is that they're versatile. They can be used in different situations, and they're easy to get started. They're a lot of fun so they'll also help strengthen the bond between you and your dog.

1. Free Shaping Games

Shaping is the act of building up a particular behaviour by using a series of small steps to achieve it. The basic principle of shaping is teaching your dog a new behaviour without using any corrections. It can help boost their confidence by encouraging them to try something new without having to worry about the consequences. It also will give you a chance to watch how your dog learns & it's a nice way for them to experience something new without any negative consequences.

a) Start out with a box on the ground and without any cues let your dog investigate and decide what to do. When they decide to offer any behaviour such as looking at or sniffing the box give them a treat and praise them. Then wait for your dog to offer another behaviour and repeat. Shaping can be used with any item, not just boxes.

The best part about free shaping is that your dog can't lose; whatever behaviour your dog chooses will be praised. It can encourage them to try something new without having to worry about doing something wrong & because your dog can be nervous in new situations you can practice it from the safety of your own home.

(Remember: Only a tiny bit of rewards are needed, so if you are using sausage just break tiny bit off)

2. Find The Treats

Teaching your dog how to play a fun nose work game such as find the treats will help boost their confidence by teaching them a new skill, and it's a great way to keep your dog busy and mentally stimulated. It's also a great way to strengthen the bond between you & your dog since it relies on working together. Since you can teach your dog to find the treats in your own home you won't be dealing with a ton of distractions that might otherwise, you're your dog anxious. That ability to focus on "finding the treats" will boost her confidence by helping your dog learn to focus their energy into a specific job rather than focusing on the environment around them.

How to play find the treats with your dog:

1. Grab some treats and have your dog sit in a stay position
2. While your dog is in the stay position put a few treats on the ground around her/him

3. Release your dog and tell them to “find the treats”
4. Encourage your dog as they start picking up the treats
5. Practice a few times until your dog understands what “find the treats” means
6. Start placing the treats further away and repeat steps 3 & 4
7. Start placing the treats in more challenging places that are out of sight such as under a rug or on a chair and repeat steps 3 & 4

Once your dog has a good idea of what “find the treats” means you can start hiding them in more challenging spots. After some practice your dog will start to hone in on their natural sniffing abilities, and they will start relying on their nose to find those hidden treats rather than using visual cues. Once this has been mastered try hiding some of their toys to find. Remember, keep it fun and positive for your dog by praising them each time they pick up a new treat.

3. Tug

When it comes to confidence building games for dogs it’s hard to go wrong with interactive play. Play keeps dogs mentally and physically fit. These games are a really fun way to strengthen the bond between you and your dog. It’s one of the best ways to engage in meaningful play with your dog & it provides plenty of mental and physical exercise. Since it doesn’t require a ton of room you can play it indoors. Also contrary to what some people say playing tug will not make your dog aggressive, nor will letting them win will not make them dominant. Letting your dog win just makes the game more fun for your dog & it encourages them to play more.

(Tip: Tug is a great interactive game for dogs, but there are a few basic rules to follow to keep it safe and fun. And if you don’t have a tug toy you can make your own with some fleece or old t-shirts.)

4. Fetch

Fetch is another interactive game you can play with your dog to help boost their confidence. It will strengthen the bond between you & your dog. It’s also great exercise. Like tug, it’s a fun way to engage with your dog to help them focus on the moment at hand — having fun.

NOTE: When playing fetch always remember not to overexert or over stretch your dogs body so that they are jumping into the air, twisting their bodies or skidding along the ground. You can deter this by throwing out at low level.

5. Trick Training

When it comes to boosting your dog’s confidence you can brush up on their basic obedience skills such as sit, stay and come here or you can teach them some advanced tricks such as weaving through your legs (it’s much easier than it sounds).

If you have a toy box where all their toys are kept, you can use this game you teach your dog to put their toys back in the toy box. If your dog already knows “drop it” have them pick up a toy and drop it when they are standing over the container. Praise your dog like crazy then rinse & repeat. I know it sounds weird to teach your dog to clean up after themselves, but it can actually be a lot of fun. By teaching your dog new skills it will help boosts their confidence & it’s a simple way to give your dog more mental stimulation.

Another fun trick to teach your dog, is the names of their toys.
Start by picking out one toy and toss it for your dog while using the toy's name. After some practice & praise they will start to assign that verbal name with the chosen toy.
Once you think that your dog knows that's toys name you can test their skills by seeing if they can "go find" that toy among their other ones. Repeat this process with their other toys, pretty soon you'll see that your dog can pick out a specific toy from a pile. Teaching your dog, the names of their toys is a great way to boost their problem-solving skills and confidence.

6. Hide & Seek

   This game can be played outside while on your walk.
   Have some high value rewards with you.
   Get your dog's focus, let them sniff your hand with the reward then throw it away from you & tell your dog to go get it.
   While your dog is going for the reward carry on moving forward, when they catch you up praise them & then throw out another reward behind you for your dog to get.
   This game is getting your dog to use their nose. By using their nose in this way, it releases dopamine which is the brains feel good chemical. This will also help build your dog's confidence, focus & also makes you super fun to be around, so when you do pass anyone/other dogs she will be far more interested in you.

Conclusion

The above confidence boosting games are a relatively simple & fun way to help with your dog's fearfulness. Playing games is a simple way to work on boosting her confidence in various situations, though it is important to keep your dog's pace in mind. Remember not to over do it as this will end up having the opposite effect. Just select one of the games & master one at a time, do not try to do them all at the same time. You can play these games for maybe 5 to 10 minutes at a time & upto 3 times a day (eg: morning, afternoon, evening).