

A TRAINING GUIDE

3 Expert Games for a Sound-Sensitive, Fearful Dog

Her choice controls the game. If she disengages, the game pauses. If she engages, the game continues.

Before you play these games, you need to understand one thing.

Your dog is not being stubborn. She is not being dramatic.

Her brain has learned that certain sounds and certain places predict danger, and no amount of encouragement from you will overwrite that learning until she experiences something different.

01

The Pause and Pass

02

The Sound Sandwich

03

The Trail Home

These three games are designed to give her that different experience at her own pace.

 Inside the house →  The door →  Outside

The location changes from inside the house to the door to outside, but the rule stays the same every single time.

THE ONE RULE

Her choice controls the game.

IF SHE ENGAGES

► The game continues

IF SHE DISENGAGES

■ ■ The game pauses

This is how fearful dogs build genuine confidence.

Through repeated experiences of “my behavior produces good things.”

The Pause and Pass

WHAT IT TEACHES

The door only opens when I am ready. Moving away is allowed. Coming back is rewarded.

DIFFERENT FROM GENERIC DOOR GAMES

Most trainers teach wait at the door as an obedience exercise where the human decides when the dog may pass. This game inverts that completely. The dog decides. You are not the gatekeeper. You are the witness. This is based on the principle that if a dog can say no, their yes means more.

INSIDE THE HOUSE

Set up. You stand near an interior doorway. Not the front door yet. The leash is on the floor. Treats are in your pocket and not in your hand. You do nothing. You wait.

If she engages. The moment your dog looks at the door, you mark with a calm yes and toss a treat behind her and away from the door. You wait again. If she looks at the door again, you mark and toss a treat behind her. If she walks toward the door, you mark and treat behind her. You are never luring her toward the door. You are rewarding the choice to look and not the approach.

If she disengages. If she disengages or turns away or lies down, the game is over. You do not call her back. You do not coax her. She ended it. That is the lesson.

At the door, then outside

AT THE DOOR

At the front door during the second week and beyond, the same game continues but now the

front door is slightly ajar. Just a crack. The sound of outside drifts in. You still do not move. You wait for her to notice the door. You mark and treat behind her. The open crack is the scary thing. Her looking at it predicts a treat that arrives away from it. You are building a positive association with the sound and sight of outside without ever asking her to cross the threshold.

OUTSIDE

Outside on the day she chooses to step out, you do nothing. You stand still. You let her sniff. You do not praise. You do not mark. You let the outside world be the reward. The sound of the door closing behind her should be the only cue that the game has changed. She is now in the final stage of the game where the world itself is the reinforcement. If she turns to go back in, you let her. The door stays open. She can always return. That option is what makes going out possible.

 **The key mechanic is that you never move toward the door.**

You never open it. The dog learns that attention to the door and not pressure from you is what produces reinforcement. The door remains neutral. You remain neutral. Her choice is the only active ingredient.

GAME 2 OF 3

The Sound Sandwich

WHAT IT TEACHES

Scary sounds happen at a distance and good things happen when I

DIFFERENT FROM STANDARD SOUND DESENSITIZATION

Standard sound desensitization has you play recordings at low volume while feeding treats. That works for a controlled setup but it does not teach the

**notice them but I
control the distance.**

dog that she has agency over the sound. This game gives your dog a physical behavior that changes the sound and its proximity. She learns she can move away from a sound and the pressure ends.

INSIDE THE HOUSE

Choose the sound. You need a sound source you can control. A phone playing a recording of her trigger at very low volume, a can of coins you can rattle, or a squeaky toy you can squeeze. The sound must be far below her threshold. If she flinches, it is too loud. If she ignores it entirely, it is too quiet.

Set up. Place the sound source across the room. You sit between the sound and your dog but slightly to the side. You are not blocking her exit. You play the sound. The moment it plays, you drop a treat on the floor between you and the sound source but not right next to it. About halfway.

If she approaches. If she moves toward the treat, she is choosing to approach the sound. You mark and treat again slightly closer.

If she retreats. If she moves away from the sound, that is also correct. You do nothing. You let her retreat. The sound stops when she retreats. You will play it again later softer or further away.

At the door, then outside

AT THE DOOR

At the door the same game continues but the sound source is now outside the door. A phone playing a recording or you rattling keys in the hallway. The door is closed. She is inside. You sit on the floor. The sound plays. A treat appears on the floor at the threshold. She can approach the door to get it or she can stay where she is. The door stays closed. She is learning that the

sound from outside predicts good things inside and that she is safe regardless of what she chooses.

OUTSIDE

Outside the real sounds happen now. But the game is now a contingency she already knows. Sound equals look at me equals treat appears. You do not need to lure her. You do not need to distract her. You just need to wait for her to notice a sound and then drop a treat at your feet. She comes to you. She gets the treat. She goes back to exploring. The sound is no longer a threat. It is a cue for a game she already knows how to win.

 **The key mechanic is that the sound plays and your dog chooses.**

If she approaches, reinforcement continues. If she retreats, the sound stops and the game pauses. She learns that her movement controls the scary thing. This is the opposite of flooding where the sound continues regardless of her behavior. In flooding she learns that nothing she does matters. In the Sound Sandwich she learns that everything she does matters.

GAME 3 OF 3

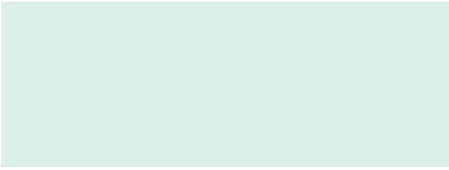
The Trail Home

WHAT IT TEACHES

I can explore because I know exactly how to get back to safety.

DIFFERENT FROM OTHER CONFIDENCE GAMES

Most confidence games focus on getting the dog out. This game focuses on the return. The ability to retreat is what makes forward movement possible. A dog who knows she can always go back is a dog who will



eventually choose to go further. This is the safe zone principle adapted for outdoor exploration.

INSIDE THE HOUSE

Build the trail. You build a trail of treats from a room she loves such as her bed or her crate or the couch where she sleeps to a room she is less sure about. This is not luring. This is trailing. You place the treats ahead of time while she is not watching.

Release her. Then you release her with a cue like go find. She discovers treats leading from her safe zone into the uncertain zone. She follows the trail. She eats. She looks around.

If she turns back. If she turns back to her safe zone, that is correct. The trail leads back too. The treats are there. She can retreat and still win. You repeat this daily. The trail grows longer. The uncertain zone becomes a place where treats appear. It becomes less uncertain.

At the door, then outside

AT THE DOOR

At the door the same principle applies. You place a trail of treats from her safe spot inside the house leading to the open doorway and then back again. She follows it to the door. She sees outside. She eats the treat at the threshold. Then she follows the trail back to safety. She did not go out. But she went to the door. And she came back. That is the win.

OUTSIDE

Outside on the day she steps out on her own the trail continues outside. You have placed a few treats just beyond the threshold but not far. Three feet maybe. She steps out. She finds the treat. She eats it. She can turn around and go back inside. The trail back is still there. The door is still open. She is outside. She is eating. She can leave whenever she wants.

🔑 The key mechanic is that every step forward is paired with an available step back.

The dog is never trapped. The retreat is not failure. The retreat is the foundation of the forward. Over weeks the trail extends. She goes five feet. Ten feet. She sniffs a leaf. She hears a sound. She comes back. The trail is there. She goes out again. The cycle repeats. Confidence is not the absence of retreat. It is the knowledge that retreat is always possible.

THE SEQUENCE

How These Three Games Work Together

GAME 1

The Pause and Pass

Teaches that the door is neutral and it opens when she chooses.

GAME 2

The Sound Sandwich

Teaches that sounds predict good things and she controls proximity.

GAME 3

The Trail Home

Teaches that the world is explorable because the return is guaranteed.

The sequence matters

You follow her pace.

WEEK 1	WEEK 2	WEEK 3	WEEK 4+
Game 1 · Inside the house			
	Game 2 · Inside the house		
		Game 1 · At the door	
		Game 2 · At the door	
			Game 3 · She leads

IF SHE REGRESSES

If she regresses because a sound startles her or she retreats, you go back to the previous stage for two days.

There is no shame in this. There is no force. The games are not a ladder to climb. They are a floor to stand on. She will move when she is ready.

THRESHOLD RULES

The Threshold Rules You Must Never Break

✓ **Green**
zone

Under threshold

WHAT YOU SEE

Her body is loose. Her eyes are soft. She takes treats. She responds to you.

WHAT YOU DO

This is where you play the games.

■ ■ **Yellow**
zone

Approaching
threshold

WHAT YOU SEE

Lip licking, yawning, stiffening, looking away, or she stops taking treats.

WHAT YOU DO

You pause. You increase distance. You reduce intensity. You do not push forward.

✕ **Red zone**

Over threshold

WHAT YOU SEE

Freezing, bolting, barking, lunging, refusing treats, or she cannot respond to cues.

WHAT YOU DO

The game is over. You leave the situation calmly. You do not correct. You do not soothe. You just exit.

The games only work below threshold. Above it, learning stops.

Your only job is to prevent the red zone. The green zone is where confidence is built.

THE ONE SENTENCE TO REMEMBER

You are not teaching your dog to be brave. You are teaching her that her choices matter. A dog whose choices matter will eventually choose the world.

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