

Threshold Fears
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When searching this topic online I discovered that the fear of walking through a doorway between rooms or in and out of the house is a real fear in dogs. They will hesitate, cower and flat out refuse to go through them. Owners are forced to push, drag and even carry their furry loved one in and out. Some accounts state that its a behavior a rescue dog came with, or dogs that have “suddenly for no reason” become fearful. While others still are of dogs that had a door close on them at one point with varying degrees of injury. Many owners feel helpless, responsible, and tend to treat the symptom and not the cause. By doing things like bribing their pet with treats, repetitive coercing, either nicely or negatively only reinforces the behavior. The primary advice from experts that seems to pop up on dog related blogs is the too general term Obedience Training. They suggest things to try like, going through to other room sitting and calling for them to follow, offering treats and even repeatedly walking back and forth. Obedience classes do provide the owner and the dog time to bond and speak to each other, but each individual case is different and there is no 100% answer. By treating the symptom you are often reinforcing the fear, or worse making the dog more afraid of you than the doorway.

My experience with being a dog parent over the last 25 years has been educational to say the least. Different dogs present different problems, which in turn require different answers. Some fixes have come easy, some have come with several mistakes and some have yet to be answered at all. Doesn't mean I stop asking the questions. It all comes down to communication. You can't find out if the problem is with you or the dog if you can't ask your dog. So we need to learn to SPEAK DOG. One of my dogs of the past, a Rhodesian Ridgeback German Shepard mix named Latte-Chino was a very dominant, protective male. He grew up going to dog parks with his many step siblings. He came when called, he listened to his Mom most of the time. The problem presented itself “out of the blue” one day at the park he started a fight with a bigger

dog. I of course reacted, separating the dogs and apologizing to the other owner and generally got emotional about it. Didn't have any issues up until that day, but once he started he continued this behavior more and more often. I noticed that he would watch the gates and when a bigger dog would come in the park he would immediately walk up and show signs that he might want to dominate that dog. It didn't always become a fight, sometimes he would just walk up, posture up, sniff, and walk away. Other times he would become obsessed with that dog and follow them until eventually I had to leash him and remove him to a different end of the park. This obviously upset me, I would be on edge and constantly be hyper vigilant. Many months passed, and many mini altercations, until I figured out it wasn't a problem with Latte, it was a problem with me. He was just being an alpha dog, and he was picking up on my stress and acting as a leader protecting me. Once I understood what he was doing I could change what was wrong with my behavior to net the results I wanted from him. I am there to protect him not the other way around. When we were near the gates, I would observe him but keep myself calm, by breathing slowly and deliberately moving around the park he sensed my confidence and didn't feel the need to protect me anymore. I didn't know it at the time but I was reasserting my role as leader and thus changed his behavior.

Going back to the fear of the doorway. Regardless of the why or the how the dog became afraid of going between rooms, if you can gain the trust of the dog you will have a better chance of getting them to work through their fear. Dogs will follow their instincts to be pack animals. If you are in fact the leader in the house, the dog will trust you and be less fearful if you earn that trust through example. Own that leadership. A dog will follow you if they sense that you are leading them to things they need. Walk confidently through your home. Show them there is nothing to be afraid of. If you let them go into a room first they have no one to show them that it is ok. Dogs pick up on very subtle things like breathing and heart rate. If they sense that you are unsure they in turn will be hesitant. Verbal commands can come across to a dog as elevated stress because it is not how they communicate. Body language is more subtle and recognizable to them. Calm your breathing, slow your heart rate, confidently walk into the room and they will follow. If you turn and

try to coerce them, call them, pull them or push them it is sending mixed signals. Some dogs will respond to one or the other but it's not allowing them to conquer their fear, only know that they made it through that time. What about the next? That is what being a leader in the pack is, if you want to maintain that role you have to constantly reinforce that trust bond by repetitive demonstration. We want to be loved by these furry little children, we want them to know that we love them. We can tell them all we want but they don't speak human. We have to show them, lead by example and they will follow. Knowing and understanding your dog and their needs is essential to creating a safe and loving environment for both human and canine.

References

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