

An active and social lifestyle reduces fearfulness in dogs, but differences between breeds are great

August 20 2020



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Noise sensitivity, fear of novel situations, and, for example, fear of slippery surfaces and heights are common behavioral problems among

dogs. According to a behavioral survey of nearly 14,000 dogs conducted at the University of Helsinki, these non-social fears are associated with factors related to the dogs' living environment, lifestyle and breed.

Dogs that were engaged in activities the most and were actively trained were found to be the least fearful.

"Physical exercise has been shown to have a [positive effect](#) on the mood in both [dogs](#) and humans. As [social animals](#), dogs enjoy doing things with their owners. At the same time, people do not necessarily wish to subject fearful dogs to training situations that are stressful for them. This can also make owners less inclined to train with their dog," says doctoral student Emma Hakanen from the Faculty of Medicine, University of Helsinki.

The survey indicates that insufficient socialization of puppies to various situations and new environments in particular has a strong link with fearfulness related to novel situations, [loud noises](#) as well as different walking surfaces, such as slippery surfaces, transparent stairs or metal grilles. On the other hand, the company of other dogs reduced the occurrence of non-social fear.

Fear of fireworks and surfaces was more prevalent among the dogs of first-time dog owners, while differences were also seen between rural and urban dogs.

"Our prior research on the environmental effects of social [fear](#) observed the same phenomena where urban dogs were more fearful than their rural counterparts. Indeed, it is interesting that human mental health problems too occur more frequently in the city than in rural areas. The ways in which our environment shapes us and our [best friend](#) is definitely an interesting topic for further research," says Professor Hannes Lohi from the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Faculty of

Medicine, University of Helsinki.

Furthermore, as suggested by prior research, the study demonstrated that non-social fearfulness also is more common in sterilized females and small dogs. Being fearful of slippery or otherwise unfamiliar surfaces was also associated with a generally fearful disposition in dogs.

Major differences between breeds

Significant differences between breeds were identified in the study, with cairn terriers among the most fearful breeds and Chinese crested dogs among the least fearful.

However, variance was seen between different non-social fears in the fearfulness of individual breeds. For instance, Welsh corgi pembrokes expressed a lot of noise sensitivity but little fearfulness of surfaces. At the same time, the latter was common among Lapponian herders, miniature schnauzers, chihuahuas and labrador retrievers, while noise sensitivity was less so.

"The breed-specific differences support the idea that fearfulness is inherited. In other words, breeding choices matter, even without knowing the exact mechanisms of inheritance. However, this study offers dog owners tools and support for previous notions related to improving the wellbeing of their dogs. Diverse socialization in puppyhood and an active lifestyle can significantly reduce social and non-social fearfulness," Lohi says.

More information: Emma Hakanen et al. Active and social life is associated with lower non-social fearfulness in pet dogs, *Scientific Reports* (2020). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-020-70722-7](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-70722-7)

Provided by University of Helsinki

Citation: An active and social lifestyle reduces fearfulness in dogs, but differences between breeds are great (2020, August 20) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-08-social-lifestyle-dogs-differences-great.html>

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