

FEAR OF FIREWORKS

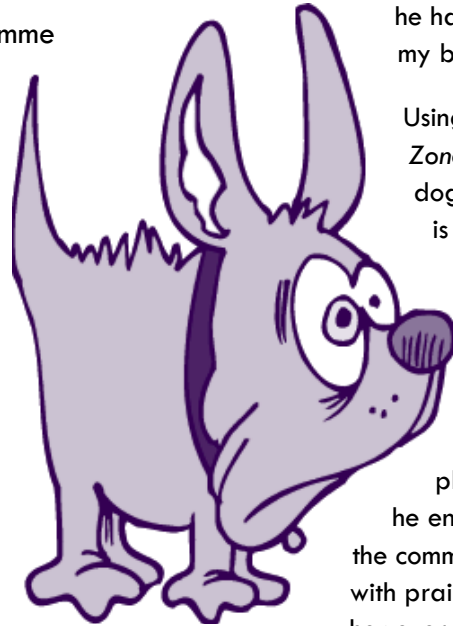
By Lynn Damme

When I brought Cody home from the Sacramento County Animal Shelter, I had no idea that two weeks later I would witness him racing through the house panting, climbing onto the backs of my couches, and trying to climb through framed art and photographs on the walls (the reflections off the glass made them look like windows). The cause of this behavior: fireworks noise.

Dogs who react fearfully to firecrackers, thunder, gunfire, and other loud sounds can panic and try to flee or exhibit destructive behavior. (A family dog I lived with growing up once dug a deep hole in a mattress when she was unattended during a thunderstorm.) If your dog is one of those dogs, there are steps you can and should take now to deal with this fear.

Desensitizing your dog to the sounds that cause the behavior—getting to the root of the problem—is your best bet, and I'll discuss that later. With the Fourth of July quickly approaching, however, there are things you need to do now to keep your dog safe and make sure the problem doesn't get worse.

First of all, make sure your dog has no opportunity to escape or to harm himself. If you have a new dog and you're not sure how he will react to the sounds of fireworks, don't leave him home alone. Make sure your dog cannot run out an open door or escape your yard. Create a safe place for the dog to go. If that place is the crate or a room, make sure the dog has access to it. (Don't lock your dog inside the crate; merely make sure



he has access to it.) Cody's safe place is under my bed.

Using Farnam Pet Products' *D.A.P. Comfort Zone* (either the plug-in or spray) in the dog's safe place may help calm the dog. It is recommended, however, that you begin spraying the area a few days before you want it to have the most effect.

If possible, distract your dog just before or as he begins getting anxious. Get out his favorite toy and play, or engage him in some other activity he enjoys. It's a good time to practice some of the commands you're learning in school; reward with praise and treats. If he loses his focus, however, and begins to act fearfully in reaction to the sounds, stop—otherwise you may be inadvertently reinforcing the fearful behavior.

If you know that your dog's fearful behavior poses a serious threat to his own safety, consult your veterinarian in advance about medication. My own vet left his young Lab (assuming Labs are bred to tolerate loud noise like gunfire) alone in the yard one Fourth of July. When he returned and pulled into the garage, the dog was standing inside—covered in blood—to greet him. During the fireworks he had leapt through a closed window to get inside the house; bloody paw prints revealed where he had paced through the house. The vet chose to medicate him the next time there was a fireworks display in the area.

While, drugs may be a quick-fix to reduce your dog's anxiety levels, they won't reduce the underlying fear or phobia; only behavior modification can do that.

Desensitization, or counter-conditioning, can teach your dog to respond in non-fearful ways to sounds or other stimuli that have previously frightened him.

Obtain a recording of firework sounds or thunderstorms (www.thundercd.com/fireworks.htm) offers both for sale) and play it a very low level while you play with your dog, feed your dog, or engage in some other behavior the dog considers pleasant. Gradually (in succeeding sessions) increase the volume while you continue this activity. If your dog displays fearful behavior at any time, stop. Begin the next session at a lower volume and proceed gradually. Eventually the dog will begin to associate good things with the previously feared sound.

Whatever solution you attempt to undertake, make sure you never reprimand or punish your dog for being afraid; it will only make him more fearful. Also, don't try to reassure or soothe him—you'll be inadvertently reinforcing the fearful behavior.

*He is your friend, your partner, your
defender, your dog.*

You are his life, his love, his leader.

*He will be yours, faithful and true, to
the last beat of his heart.*

*You owe it to him to be worthy of such
devotion.*

-Unknown

Website Gives Valuable Tips on Firework Phobias

Peter Coleshaw, BVSc MRCVS, a veterinary behaviorist in the UK, has put together a website with a wealth of information for pet owners about helping their pets overcome the fear of fireworks.

Downloads on the site include the Advanced Programme for Treating Firework Phobias which gives owners a step-by-step instructions, and a Phobia Recording Chart, to help owners track their dog's progress and reactions while using a fireworks CD in the desensitization process.

The site can be found at

www.fearoffireworks.com

Other web searches for "firework phobias" will turn up a wealth of information for this common canine problem.

4Paws University Teaches Kids Dog Safety and Bite Prevention

4 Paws trainers and dogs recently visited the Shalom School in Sacramento to teach kids dog safety and bite prevention.

Some of the exercises included greeting dogs safely, what to do if approached by a strange dog and even a race against the dogs to prove that you can't outrun a dog.

Each student received a dog safety activity book.



If you are interested in having a dog safety workshop for your child's school or organization, please contact us:

Phone: (916) 549-0260

Email: trainer@4pawsu.com