

Reduce Anxiety and Grow Your Dog's Confidence with these Pro Dog Training Tips

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG If you're a regular listener to this podcast, you have heard me say over and over, and over again, "the best thing that we can do for our dogs is to protect and grow their confidence". Well, recently I got a letter from a listener who asked, "what does that look like Susan?"

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. And if you are watching this on YouTube, go ahead and hit the like button right now while I read to you the letter that I received from Christine H. She wrote, "I feel like I still don't know precisely what confidence is in a dog. This has some great tips for owners who have identified or suspected their dog of being less confident, but I'd love to hear more on how to gauge a dog's confidence and assess when you're succeeding in building or maintaining your dog's confidence."

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Great question. Let me just say, just like people the answer is, it depends. I'm going to tell you a couple of little stories. First one is about a dear friend of mine, Greg Louganis. Now, if that's a name you recognize it's because Greg has won, I believe, five Olympic medals, four of which were gold.

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So, let's just say he's the greatest diver of all time. We'll just leave it at that. So, what do you think that man's confidence is? It's through the roof when he's on a diving board. Now Greg's a little bit older than me, so it's not like he gets on many diving boards these days, but he has gotten on a couple. Now a few years back, Greg has been a long-time student of mine and he was running one of his dogs in agility and he got to the national finals of the American Kennel Club's agility championships.

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And I was talking to him throughout the weekend by phone, I was here at home and just before the last event, he's going into the finals. He's one of the top 10 dogs in all of the America. And I'm talking to him on the phone, and I say, "Greg, Greg you're so nervous." "Oh, I'm petrified. I'm petrified." I said, "Greg, you've got five Olympic medals." He says, "Fill this place with water and give me a board and I'll be okay. This is different. I've never been here before."

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So, confidence is situational and it's the same for our dogs. So, you might have a dog who is confident in your living room. Now, what does that look like?

You're going to want to refer to [episode number four](#), where I talked about T.E.M.P.

That your dog's body language will tell you a lot about the level of confidence they have. But in the living room, in your own home with no other visitors around and you're just chillaxing, that probably is a good indication of your dog's body when they're confident. Nothing to be anxious about. Now add company to that situation. Now your dog might get anxious. Add children to that situation, add a dog, a new dog. Maybe it's a big dog. Maybe it's a small dog. Maybe it's a puppy. All those three are different situations.



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So, a dog who likes one dog might not like all dogs. Actually, it's pretty common. Don't expect dogs to like other dogs. That's not the norm. Some dogs like one dog, but that doesn't mean they're going to like all dogs, but I digress. That's not the topic of today's conversation. And so, you will know when your dog is lacking confidence in any situation when they're not showing you those physical signs with their tail, their ears, their eyes, mouth.

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Their posture, the respiration rate, how sweaty the pads on the bottom of their feet get. Those are all signs that your dog might be anxious or lacking confidence. So, one of the problems with dogs who lack confidence, is life is harder, for people when they lack confidence. Like life is harder for dogs when they lack confidence.

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So that's why I say over and over again, our job is to protect the confidence they've got and build on it. You're going to be starting at different levels of confidence with all dogs. What makes the difference?

Number one, their parents. It will start with the breed of dog. For example, the two breeds of dogs that I have had the most Jack Russell Terriers and Border Collies. Neither one of those breeds are very confident, but they show it in two different ways.

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The Border Collies tend to be submissive and would be more likely to roll over on their belly if they were upset, where a Jack Russell is kind of like a "bite first and ask questions later" kind of dog. Not really, I'm not spreading rumors about Jack Russells, but that might be how they would express their lack of confidence, by growling rather than retreating.

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So, there are dogs that are more confident genetically and that's how they are. And a lot of the breeds that you see as service dogs are the ones that are more confident by nature. However, you're going to get Golden Retrievers and Labradors that aren't confident because it depends on the two parents that are the sire and the dam of your puppy or of that puppy.

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Now you could have great sires and dams, but then the breeder plays a big role because from birth to eight weeks old, there's a lot of things that us as breeders can do to bring out the puppy's confidence to a max.

And then the puppy [goes to the new home](#) and there's some critical socialization periods that if you aren't getting that puppy out in a way that protects and grows the confidence that's there, then you could create a dog who is less confident.

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And let's face it, we're in a pandemic right now so there's a lot of puppies that don't have the confidence that they otherwise may have. My own puppy included. That I definitely haven't been able to take her to the level of confidence, I mean, every other dog I've ever owned has been to agility trials and fly ball tournaments. I haven't played flyball in probably 15 or 20 years, but I still go to fly ball tournaments every time I get a new puppy. These are great places to socialize your dog.



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My eight-month-old puppy has not had that opportunity because we've been in lockdown pretty much her entire life. Does that mean she can't be a confident dog? Not at all. It just means I have to be very, very intentional, which is what I have been. I'm going to share with you on this podcast a little bit about what that looks like. Now, we have our dogs that lack confidence and unfortunately they get labeled.

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Labels are just a death sentence. Labels mean "this is all you will ever be" because there's something called confirmation bias, have you ever noticed. If you get a new car that you suddenly noticed that same model on the road? Wow, everybody's getting that model and color of car. No, it's just that now you're programmed more to look for that model of car. Confirmation bias.

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Same is true [when we label our dog](#). So, dogs that are lacking confidence they'll be labeled as fearful, scaredy cats, timid, shy, anxious, aggressive.

"What Susan? Aggressive? Lack of confidence, [aggressive](#)?"

Absolutely. Remember, I mentioned that Jack Russell's when they lack confidence, they may start growling. Now they are by no means the only breed, I would say every single dog on the planet has the potential to express their lack of confidence by growling. They don't all do it, but they have that potential.

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And here's what happens. When they growl the first time their owners will go "Rover! What are you doing?!" And they'll berate them. And so, the one person on this planet that that dog is looking to, to give them confidence is now yelling at them because we associate a dog growling as being a bad dog. They are not. A dog growling is saying, "Please take my hand and help me, cause it's a little scary right now."

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And we're saying, "What are you doing?!" And we go all spider monkey on them. So now they were a little bit lacking in confidence and now they're terrified. That's sadly how a lot of dogs end up being put in rescues or euthanized because it all cascades.

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Confidence can be built. What we have to do, is first recognize what we have. My last Terrier, Decaff, she was three quarters Jack Russell, one quarter Border Collie. And she was of all my dogs, the one dog that lacked the most confidence as a youngster. And she didn't have what I would say, the [generalized confidence](#) to all locations in her life until she was five years old.

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So, generalization is that chill relaxed way your dog is living in your living room. We want to generalize that so that it happens in every situation. And if that's a goal that you have, it takes time and patience, but you can get there. So, a dog is out, and they show a lack of confidence, a fear, and what you can do is desensitize them to that fear. And there's two ways of doing it. For example, my puppy, like all my dogs, I want them to swim. So, my puppy is not confident around water. Of all the dogs I've owned, she's the first one that "Nah, I'm not sure about this water. I'm not sure if I really want to go swimming".



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And again, if left it up to chance some dogs just won't swim. They'll run around the outside of the pool or they'll run around the outside of the pond barking, or maybe getting their ankles wet. They'll never go swimming. I want my dogs to love to swim. It's great exercise. It's a great way to cool off and they can all love to swim, but I don't leave it up to chance.

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I will intentionally grow that confidence. So, what I've got right now is, she shows fear around water. Now there is, if you can Google this, the John Wayne method of teaching swimming. Just Google 'John Wayne teaching swimming'. And you'll see this old, I don't know if it's even a black and white movie, the actor John Wayne in a Western picking up a small kid who said "I can't swim. I'm six years old. I can't swim." And he throws him out to the middle of a river.

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That's called flooding, funny enough. That if you take something you're afraid of, like snakes, and you went to a psychologist and said, "I'm afraid of snakes." and they said, "we're going to desensitize you by flooding".

What they would do is they would put you in a pit of snakes until you weren't afraid anymore. "Oh, I don't think so". But that's a way that people will deal with fears in dogs quite often. Get over it, and they surround them with it. Like if I'm a little afraid of kids, they ask the kids to come closer or pick up my puppy.

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No. What we're going to do is desensitize them by giving them something they love in the presence of something they're afraid of. But we keep what they're afraid of a long, long, long way away. What's really good if you're trying to build confidence is [to create cues](#), words that mean something amazing is going to happen.

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So, teach your dog to bark by saying "Who's a brave dog?" Because what happens is, when our dogs show that they're a little afraid we go, "Oh, it's okay honey. Oh what's going on? What honey, is it okay?" And we get all gushy, let's change that. So, if there's something that your dog might be afraid of for example, I brought This! into the pool that we have here in the house, and I just played tug all around the pool.

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And I "Get dat thing." She loves to tug, and before I ever brought her near the water, let's just tug around the water. "Oh, okay. This is a good place then. Yeah, I can be here. Yeah! I don't mind this place". So, I changed the trigger to "I'm not sure about this place. That's water. I don't know if I'm going in here." to "Wait this place means tug. Oh my gosh. I love this place!"

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So, you might teach your dog to bark by saying "Who's a brave dog?" and the dog barks at you. And that may be just one way that if they're worried, I wouldn't do this around other dogs though. But if they're worried because they're in a new environment. "Who's a brave dog?" Bark, bark, bark. "Okay, let's tug." Or you might get them to jump up in hand touch, motion stimulates their arousal and actually helps them to be more confident.



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So, I like tugging, getting them to jump up and hand target, getting to weave between your legs. If a dog is really fearful, then you've made the big mistake of putting them in what's called over threshold. Now, sometimes this just comes upon us. We didn't know that as we're out walking, that we're getting near a preschool and your kids or your dogs afraid of kids and all of a sudden all these kids are kind of running after you cause they want to meet your puppy. That's worst-case scenario.

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So, your dog instantly is going to go over threshold, and over threshold means that they are instantly going to show massive signs of fear. So, we want to prevent our dogs from going over threshold of anything that they're afraid of, so that we can grow confidence in the face of that fear.

And it is possible. You just have to be patient and most important, you have to [write a journal](#).

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In [episode 66](#), I spoke about a period where This! was going through some resource guarding when she was showing aggression towards the other dogs in the house. And the most important part of that was creating a journal.

You want to grow your dog's confidence and listen, if you've got a [rescue dog](#) or a [new puppy](#) here in the pandemic, absolutely start a journal, a confidence building journal. And you're going to write down where your dog is the most confident and what that looks like. Who's there, what's the environment like, are there any noises around?

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For example, my dogs are so chill when they're in the house, but if it was to thunder outside Tater Salad and Swagger would not be chill. They would not be confident. They would not want to, well Swagger will always play tug, but they are not happy campers. So, where's your dog most confident and write as much information about what your dog looks like and what's in that environment.

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Is it the same in every room of your house? Make sure it is. Is it the same in your backyard? I might not be. What about in your front yard? Oh, definitely not. And then what happens if visitors come to your house? Are they the same?

What happens if visitor brings the children or the dogs, or when does it change. Now what about when you go to a park? Just don't expect your dog to be this brave, confident dog when you take them to new places.

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Listen, let's say you are an amazing accountant. "Oh, man. I am in my wheelhouse when somebody asks me a question about accounting. Yeah". What if I asked you to come to our video studio here, we turn all the lights and camera, and you shoot in front of the camera. You tell me about accounting. "Uh, I don't know. The cameras might make me a little nervous. I can't." "Oh, okay."

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"So, you're in a new environment. You're not actually yourself." So what about "I spoken to groups of 10,000 people, and would you like to do that, accountant person?" "Hmm, I don't think I can count on that accountant quite that much. No, I don't think I'd do that."



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But we expect our dogs to be that. So, show your dogs the same grace that you're extending to yourself and recognize they aren't going to be confident in all environments. They are humans just like us. I know they're really not humans. But we need to grow their confidence and the journal is the way to get there.

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And you're going to take that new puppy or that new dog or that dog that's not really confident and you're going to give them micro injections. Bring all the things they love, best of all, plan. I'm going to do this, my dog's really confident with hand touches. I'm going to get hand touches in all environments in the house, in the backyard, in the front yard. And I'm going to say, "Who's a brave dog?" and get my dog to jump up and touch my hand.

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Then I'm going to go to a baseball diamond and I'm going to evaluate, and you might get a look over your shoulder, and grow it there until you get that same confidence. Confidence is something that you grow. And confidence is something every dog deserves to have grown.

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So please take the time, grab a journal, the most awesome thing is you get to buy a journal. Who doesn't love buying a journal? And start tracking your dog's confidence and start growing your dog's confidence. See you next time on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 4: T.E.M.P. \(Tail, Eyes/Ears, Mouth, Posture\)](#)

[Podcast Episode 8: Get Your Dog in the Belief Loop of Awesome](#)

[Podcast Episode 29: Understanding and Preventing Reactivity and Aggression in Your Dog](#)

[Podcast Episode 38: 3 Keys to a Confident Dog](#)

[Video Blog: Vlog: Understanding Your Dog's Triggers](#)

[Podcast Episode 71: Pro Dog Trainer's Secret to Help Your Naughty Dog](#)

[Podcast Episode 66: Resource Guarding: Dog vs Dog Aggression](#)

[Podcast Episode 70: Critical Info for Your Puppy's First Day and Night at Home](#)

[Podcast Episode 78: How to Train a Rescue Dog with Behavior Problems](#)



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About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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