

How An Anchor Dog Can Help Overcome Your Dog's Anxiety Or Reactivity

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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SG Over the weekend, I shared a post on social media thanking my friends John and Lynda for joining This! and bringing along their dog Totie to be This!'s anchor dog. Now that prompted people to say, "Well, what the heck is an anchor dog?" Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. And as you may have guessed, the topic of today's podcast is anchor dogs.

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Now, anchor dog, not to be confused with one of my favorite movies, *Anchorman*, "stay classy San Diego," an anchor dog is a term that I coined for dogs that help other dogs be more confident. Now think of an anchor. It's grounding, right? According to Dr. Google, in ancient times, the symbol of an anchor represented safety, and an anchor dog certainly is what I'm looking for, safety for my dogs.

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Because as you know, dogs pick up on the emotions of people, and they also pick up on the emotions of other dogs. And so, if you have a dog that is pretty confident in the environment that your dog isn't currently confident, then that dog could be your anchor dog. Now I'm going to put a little asterisk on this because it depends on why your dog is confident.

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So, in the case of This!, as I mentioned in [episode number 29](#), where I talked about understanding and preventing reactivity and aggression in your dogs, I mentioned in that episode that different can be alarming to some dogs. And [in This!'s case](#), that's a big reason for her fear, is it's different. We spend a lot of time here on the property. She knows what goes on here; she can be confident here. Something that's different sends off alarm bells. What I would like is that different could be white noise, that different could be curious.

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So, is it something that I've seen many times before? If it's not, I'll be curious. I'm not going to go from zero to fearful. I'm going to go from zero to curious, and that curious could simply be diffused by, "Oh, just that," or "I need to investigate more." And what's going to get my dog there is an anchor dog. And so, if you have a dog that is fearful because of bad experiences, an anchor dog won't give you as much benefit.

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I'm not saying they won't be beneficial. I think a dog modeling really good confidence is going to be beneficial to any dog. But let me give you an example. If you have a dog who has never been around thunder, let's say, and they're going to be experiencing thunder for the first time. I would love for that dog to have the opportunity to be around dogs who've been around thunder a lot and really could care less about it.



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But if you have a dog who is fearful of thunder, and you bring in a dog who's never been around thunder, the opposite could happen. So, you could say, "Oh, I'm going to bring around this anchor dog to help my dog who's fearful." Well, guess what, you might be turning your anchor dog into a fearful dog.

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So, an anchor dog works greatest if the dog's fear comes from a lack of experience. They don't know how to decipher different as safe. They just don't have that kind of exposure. So that's what I'm looking for, and quite honestly, I started using Totie as an anchor dog way back when This! was a puppy, and I wanted to get her into the city.

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Well, the city is different than the quiet country and all the bustling and the traffic, and she would get big eyes. And so, I just started going places with Lynda and Totie, and Totie was like, "Oh, I'm chill. There's nothing to be excited about." And so, she actually goes into the city with no issue whatsoever.

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Except when we came out of our last lockdown, I noticed she was very leery of men, of children, and of dogs in particular. So, I'm going to go into some detail on how I use the anchor dog to help This!. But first, I want to talk about what makes a good anchor dog or who would be a great anchor dog.

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And a great anchor dog, number one, has zero to do with the training of the dog. You could have a dog who really is not well-trained, and they could be a great anchor dog. They might be chill in any environment. The age, you would think, "well, it would be a more mature and older dog," and in most cases, yes, but not necessarily.

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For example, we had a six-month-old Saint Bernard at our place today, and Speedy Gonzales was so chill and lay back. He would've made a great anchor dog for This!. As a matter of fact, I asked his owner Kathy if I could bring This! out to meet Speedy, and Speedy immediately looked at her and could see that she wasn't confident, and he looked away.

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It was just so cool to see the six-month-old puppy go, "I got ya. We're good here". And so, while Kathy fed Speedy, he allowed her to sniff, and she really was a little bit cautious. She didn't want to sniff, but she hand touched near him. And at the end, she actually went right by him without being worried in any way, shape, or form.

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I believe Speedy would have been a great dog to have gone on adventures with. And it doesn't matter that she doesn't know him, and it doesn't even matter that she doesn't like him. He will model great behavior in environments that she currently isn't confident in. And as I mentioned in [episode number 79](#), you can reduce anxiety and grow your dog's confidence by being aware of where your dog is currently confident.



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So, confidence, as I mentioned in that episode, is situational. And so, you need to know where your dog shows that great confidence and where they need to grow more confidence. Now, do you need an anchor dog before you can grow your dog's confidence? No.

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You can grow confidence on your own. And I have taken This! out on her own, but let's face it, it's unpredictable out there. We don't know what is around the corner when we're walking in the conservation area or who is [off-leash](#). And so, I'd like to hedge my bets that when I take my puppy away from home, the chances are I've set up the situation that I can control the outcome is going to be a positive one for her.

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Now we can't guarantee it, but I'm going to do everything I can to help make that happen. And that's where the use of an anchor dog comes in. So, an anchor dog, it doesn't matter the age. It doesn't matter if they're well behaved, and it doesn't matter if your dog even knows or likes this other dog.

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What matters is you know where your dog isn't confident, and you ask around, "Hey, do you have a dog who loves this, this and this or doesn't care about this, this and this?". I don't mean This! my puppy, of course. And then that makes a great anchor dog. And you arrange to meet at a certain location. So, what happens with this anchor dog?

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Now, the locations that I choose are big, so if the dogs are walking on a sidewalk, let's say I pick the city, there's nowhere for me to escape to. So, baseball parks or soccer fields, or the conservation area where there are areas off the beaten path that I can get to. And so, here's what happens. The anchor dog is out in front. They're the wingman, but instead of flying in behind, they're flying out in front initially.

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And so, if we see another person, at first it was people, children in particular, and dogs, we would stop on the side, and I would just feed my puppy with the anchor dog out in front. And my puppy and I backed behind. And if I thought that she looked worried, I would just get her off to the side, deeper into the forest.

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Now, what if the children say, "Oh, puppies! We want to see!" That's where my friend with the anchor dog would get up and intersect so that they wouldn't get to This! first, they wouldn't get to This! at all. And here's another thing that I mentioned here on the podcast episode number eight.

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Be careful [how you talk about your puppy](#) and why you're doing what you're doing. And so, if there's a child that gets intercepted, your anchor dog handler, instead of saying, "Oh, she's afraid of children.", what we're going to say is, "Hey, she's growing confidence around children. Do you mind patting my dog so she can see how much fun that is?"



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You don't want to rehearse for your own subconscious limitations about your dog. You're just going to tell the truth; we're working on confidence. It's super important that you're not rehearsing that. So, our anchor dog intercepts other dogs; our anchor dog intercepts whatever your dog is showing a lack of confidence in today. And then you're going to say, "You know what, my dog's looking good."

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And here's what happened recently a week ago on one of these outings; I noticed that This! actually watched the other dog going by and wagged her tail. Now she's overcome her worry with men. She's overcome her worry with children. She absolutely adores them now, all through, you know, strategies of counterconditioning and generalization. And dogs, we're now turning the corner.

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So, in our last three outings, she has looked at the dogs and wagged her tail. That's a far cry from barking and growling, which is what we did have. And my anchor dog played a massive role in that. And so, once I see that she's confident, for example, on our recent outing with Totie, Totie took the lead and was out in front for most of the meetings.

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And then I thought, "You know what? She's doing pretty good". So, I brought her a little bit closer to the, onto the path. And in some of the outings, I actually let her be out in front so that the people pass her first. This was huge. It was huge. I mean, I still put my body between the people and the other dogs, but if the people would stop, I would happily let her go and meet the other people.

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She has yet to want to meet the other dogs, but she's happily circling around them, and as she did today with our big galootenstein, Mr. Speedy Gonzales, she actually would walk by him, almost touching him without any kind of issue at all. Does she love other dogs? No, nor do I need her to love other dogs. I want her to look at other dogs as white noise.

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They're there. They might look at me. They might even come over and smell me. That's chill; I'll just be chill here. There are a few dogs, actually, three that she likes to play with, but there's only one dog that was previously unknown to her. So, there's one little Sheltie named Keeper that comes onsite for lessons every now and again, she loves to play with Keeper, but it wasn't always that way. She would run and be very, very conscious of where Keeper was.

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Now they chase each other, and it's loads of fun. So, it's a process. My goal always is I want my puppy to feel safe. I want my puppy to be happy. And in order to get there, I'm going to take her outside of her comfort zone, but I love going there with an anchor dog.

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Of course, there's a lot of layers, a lot of strategy involved, but an anchor dog is something you might not be familiar with, but I know it could be a massive help to you. Don't be afraid to ask your friends, but make sure that you talk to whoever's handling the anchor dog so that they know what your expectations are.





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Here's what I'd like you to do, "Boom, boom, boom." Here's what I'm going to be doing, "Boom, boom, boom." And finally, if you can switch up those anchor dogs, it just helps to generalize that good behavior to your dog.

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Remember, confidence is situational. You've got to get to more and more environments for your dog to feel safe and be happy and grow that confidence in every situation they come across. I'll see you next time here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

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

[Podcast Episode 79: Reduce Anxiety and Grow Your Dog's Confidence with These Pro Dog Training Tips](#)

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

[YouTube Video: Normalizing Imperfection in Dog Training](#)

[YouTube Video: Should My Dog Be Off Leash Right Now?](#)



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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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