

Too shy, shy

A shy pup turns into a shy adult, who simply can't cope with the hectic family life that surrounds her



Cocker Spaniel (posed by a model)

Just as I sat down at the end of a busy day, the phone rang. "My vet has given me your details. You are my last hope. My husband won't put up with it anymore and I love my dog..." After 45 minutes on the phone, we arranged a meeting.

Melanie bought Florrie, a Cocker Spaniel, at 10 weeks of age. Compared with the rest of the litter, she was very timid. Despite this, Melanie and her husband, Ted, decided to take Florrie.

Melanie and Ted have a very busy household with four children of their own, one of whom is very gifted musically,

and two foster children, one of whom is physically disabled. Just after Florrie arrived, Melanie's mother suffered a stroke and Melanie became her full-time carer. Plus, there's a constant stream of visitors to the home, such as physiotherapists, speech therapists, doctors, nurses and music tutors - not the ideal home, perhaps, for a shy Cocker.

It soon became evident that Florrie was not coping; she was barking, urinating and running around with her tail between her legs when left alone and when visitors came.

When she was three years

old, Ted decided to buy another puppy - a Labrador - hoping that the new addition would teach Florrie how to relax.

The family have only a small garden, meaning that Florrie had to go out for walks, which she hated. She would pull all the way around the route, and, when turning for home, she would 'scrabble' at the ground in her desperation to get back there. This resulted, on occasion, in her pads bleeding.

Florrie screamed the house down when people arrived. On one occasion, the final straw, there was a meeting in the house regarding the disabled foster child and Florrie screamed the whole day because of all the different people coming and going. As for anyone coming to the door, the result was mayhem, especially with the postman.

I received the family's questionnaire before the consultation. Florrie was fed once a day and was still on 'junior' food although she appeared to be underweight. Her reaction to other dogs was to fly at them aggressively. Attempts to join puppy socialising classes had ended halfway through the first session with the trainer asking them to remove her, as she was too disruptive. She was fine with the new puppy and they got on well. She would not urinate while out on a walk. She became very reactive the moment she saw another dog and/or person and was very nervous with visitors, hiding away and showing aggression. A Pet Corrector and Stop Bark collar had been used on her and the opinion of her owners was that her behaviour was getting worse.

My reaction to all this information was that perhaps Florrie would have been better

off in a quieter environment with an established routine.

I arrived at the home and rang the bell. There was a cacophony of sound and I could identify both Florrie's high-pitched barking and also a deeper bark - the puppy, Logan, was learning unwanted behaviour from Florrie.

I followed Melanie into the kitchen and Florrie panicked and ran under the table, trying desperately to get away from me. I ignored her completely, and, over the next few minutes, she plucked up the courage to sniff my bag (lots of nice treats inside) and my trousers (nice doggie smells). She returned to her bed and curled up, watching me. When I made eye contact with her, she immediately growled and returned to hiding under the table and looking for support from Melanie.

Into a routine

Florrie had many problems and our first priority was to overcome the problems in the house. Although she did not like going for walks, she had to continue with these, but I felt that they could be reduced from three to two, following the same route each day and at the same time.

Florrie's emotional state was in the fear/terror bracket with huge swings over to relief when everything was quiet again. The feeling of relief brings a huge rush of addictive endorphins into the dog's brain, which makes them feel good. As her behaviour was worsening, I wondered if there was an element of her pushing herself from fear towards terror in order to get a bigger relief rush. Of course, the use of the Pet Corrector and Stop Bark collar in the past would also have increased her fear of anything new happening.

Stage one was then set in motion. Florrie was to have two meals a day and she was to move on to a good-quality adult food with no colours and no artificial additives; she was also given some pure carbohydrates, potato or pasta, twice a day. She started to wear a calming collar, which appeared to help. Calming collars replicate the pheromones of a bitch while feeding/caring for pups.

Get clicking

We needed to increase her stimulation to distract her from her behaviour, so Florrie was introduced to clicker training. Initially, we used a very quiet clicker and the change was amazing - within minutes she appeared more relaxed and even started to present behaviours to Melanie, trying to work out what Melanie was asking for. We started with Florrie learning to give a paw, and Melanie continued to work on this in the house at quiet times during the day.

Florrie was then taught to touch Melanie's hand on command. Eventually, Melanie could put her hand down, say, "Touch", and then, as Florrie approached her hand, she would move it slowly around behind her. This put Florrie behind Melanie, providing her with a hiding place in times of stress, and gave Melanie more control.

Florrie also learnt a signal that would mean she was going to be left or ignored. Most importantly, Florrie learnt that as long as she had this signal, it meant that someone would return to her and that she would get attention. The postbox was moved from the front door to stop the behaviour with the postman. Visitors started to come to the back door rather than the front, and Florrie learnt that this meant a click and a treat for her. Florrie started to have more games around the

house, thus increasing her level of stimulation and giving her more stimulation relevant to her breed.

Stage two was a big challenge: how to get Florrie to enjoy her walks. A lot of work had been achieved in the house and she was now coping with the busy family she lived with. However, walks were still a challenge. We had to work with her collar and lead, as I was concerned that trying anything new might provoke more stress.

The first step was in the garden. As Florrie pulled on the lead, whoever was walking her would stand still and wait. Eventually, Florrie would turn and look at them, and she was then immediately clicked and rewarded. This behaviour was shaped to the point that Florrie would stand quietly on a loose lead in the garden.

The next step was to open the gate. Again, slowly shaping the behaviour, Florrie eventually got outside the garden on to the pavement. Games established in the house were used to keep Florrie's attention focused. Melanie and Florrie practised with a friend and their dog, getting Florrie to move behind Melanie, using the touch command, rather than lunging and barking at the dog. Eventually, Florrie would see another dog or person and just move behind whoever was walking her.

They never vary Florrie's route or routine, but they do vary the games that they play with her. She can now cope with a 45-minute walk twice a day and urinates while out.

The family now understand Florrie much better and are looking at the world through the eyes of a very timid dog. They anticipate problems and act accordingly without reinforcing Florrie's fears. She has moved from terror to apprehension on her emotional scale. ■



Rachael Forrest started her career with animals in 1991, working as an animal care assistant for the RSPCA. She then qualified as a veterinary nurse and has spent many years in both welfare and private practice, where she has enjoyed working with a variety of animals. Her interest in animal behaviour led her to COAPE and she completed the Advanced Diploma in Companion Animal Behaviour and Training in 2007. She joined Pet Matters in Devon in 2008. Since then she has been involved with some very interesting cases and enjoys the many challenges that working in pet behaviour has to offer.



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