

Shaping a confident greyhound

Industry Practice Guide 8.1



Greyhound Welfare Code of Practice

Relevant Standards:

7.1 All greyhounds, including puppies from the age of 3 weeks, must be provided with daily exposure to humans through gentle handling. **R**

7.2 All puppies and greyhounds older than 8 weeks of age must be provided with regular contact with, and exposure to, other vaccinated dogs that are compatible.

7.3 Participants must provide greyhounds in their care with opportunities for expression of normal canine behaviours, to prevent stress and anxiety. If a greyhound shows signs of stress or anxiety which do not resolve quickly, or exhibits stereotypic behaviours, participants must seek veterinary treatment. **R**

Successful racing greyhounds usually show a level of alertness and excitement in a racetrack environment.

However, some greyhounds show an excessive reaction to their surroundings and most trainers will have seen greyhounds that are 'nervy' or 'highly-strung'.

Stressed, anxious or highly strung dogs can be difficult to handle, both at home and at the track, and can be a challenge to get ready for a race or suffer poor performance at the track.

Fear and anxiety have an effect on a greyhound's body, causing stress which can affect a greyhound's weight, condition, hydration status, and acid-base balance.

Anxious and nervous greyhounds may eat more than others, because anxiety consumes energy, or they may lose condition very quickly if they stop eating.

Anxiety may lead to excessive panting, even when the weather is not hot. This increases the greyhound's fluid loss so the greyhound can become dehydrated more quickly than other dogs, and may recover poorly after a run.

Nervous greyhounds may show other adverse signs too, for example:

- diarrhoea if it becomes nervous in a new environment;
- low-grade health problems and frequent illness with longer term stress,
- predisposition to infection, anaemia, skin problems, or more serious problems like pneumonia and other infections.

Excessive stress and anxiety can have a significant physiological impact on the greyhound – it is like these greyhounds have 'run their race' before they get out of the kennels.

This is not good for the greyhound's well-being or its race performance. Travelling and race-day routines are busy times and can be a lot for an anxious dog to take in. By the time their race comes around they have already used up most of their energy.

What shapes your greyhound's behaviour?

A greyhound's behavior is the result of its:

1. Genetic temperament,
2. Learned experiences (good and bad) and,
3. The environment the greyhound is in.

Temperament

Greyhound breeders naturally look to breed for speed and strength, but behaviour is also thought to be highly heritable. Breeding a female with particular behavioural traits is more likely to produce pups with similar attributes. Try to choose parents that are calm and confident.

Learned experiences

Greyhounds learn from their experiences just as humans do, but there are particular ages where they are most able to learn. The experiences they have – or don't have - during these periods will help shape their behavior as an adult.

The main 'socialisation period' occurs from 3 weeks to 3 months of age. At this age puppies learn very quickly, and early learning experiences will shape their attitude and response to later ones. This is why early socialisation is so important.

Puppies that are exposed to new and different experiences in a positive way are more likely to grow into confident greyhounds and adjust better to changes in their environment in later life.

It is thought that the age of 7 – 8 months is also understood to be particularly important for greyhounds.

Experiences a greyhound has at this age can have more long-term effects than if they had the same experience at a different age. Therefore, it is particularly important to try and make experiences at this age positive and rewarding.

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Environment

Learning continues throughout a greyhound's life. Dogs learn by association, so if a dog has a good experience, it is likely to associate the good experience with where it was and what it was doing at the time, guiding and shaping the dog's future reactions and behavior.

For example, if a greyhound goes to the vet with an injury, and the examination causes more pain, then the greyhound may associate the pain (a bad experience) with going to the vet in the future. It is important to balance the negative with experience with positive ones. Try offering the greyhound a treat in the consulting room to build positive memories in your greyhound over the long term.

A greyhound with a calm, confident temperament and a history of positive experiences will be easier to settle in the same and new situations. However, anxious or nervy greyhounds tend to find bad experiences much harder to overcome which may be hard to reshape through positive reinforcement and training.

How to recognize signs of anxiety

Signs of anxiety in a greyhound can be subtle and easy to miss. Greyhounds tend to "freeze" when they are anxious or frightened, rather than barking or making a ruckus.

Here are some signs to look for:

- Licking lips (some anxious dogs can have pink staining around their muzzle)
- Yawning or trembling
- "Freezing up" or "shutting down" - non-responsive behaviour
- Whining
- Hyper vigilance or scanning the environment
- Tail tucked low and tight (look closely at the hairs on their tail, they often stick up around the base)
- Hiding
- Restlessness and difficulty relaxing
- Following you closely
- Destructive behaviour
- Collecting toys or objects
- Lack of appetite
- Recurring or chronic diarrhoea or frequent urination
- More overt signs of anxiety include growling and biting

Preventing anxiety

Early socialisation is the best insurance against anxiety. Providing puppies with different experiences in a positive environment will help them grow into happy, confident greyhounds. Make sure you introduce your puppies to new people, sounds and objects, and taking them to different places.

Be sure to keep all experiences happy and fun.

Regular gentle handling of greyhounds is also important in preventing anxiety. The Code of Practice requires that all greyhounds must have daily contact with humans. If a puppy or greyhound shows signs of anxiety, some extra attention and reassurance from a human may help.

If the greyhound is showing symptoms of anxiety, try to identify the trigger. Is it something in their environment, like a strange noise or a different person or activity? If you can identify the trigger, try to remove it, or remove the greyhound from the situation. You can then try a gentler way of re-introducing it later, if you have to – and then make sure that you associate it with positive reinforcement such as treats or human contact.

Above all, it is important to avoid punishing the anxious behaviour or responding in a way that the greyhound may experience as punishment, as this is likely to cause further anxiety.

If the greyhound's anxiety persists, or it develops abnormal behaviours or medical issues, seek veterinary advice.



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