



Cynophobia can be defined as a persistent and often irrational fear of dogs. Many incidents can cause cynophobia to show itself, perhaps most often, some type of childhood trauma connected with a dog can be the underlying cause, such as being bitten or seeing somebody being attacked by a dog. Sometimes the person who has the condition can't remember a particular incident that triggered the fear and even a mild incident like watching a scary film about a dog or a large dog approaching or maybe a puppy jumping up a small child could trigger the condition.

Cynophobia can show itself in many ways. People may feel a degree of mild anxiety just being in the presence of a dog and some may have a full-blown panic attack if they come into contact with a dog, or even see them on the television or a photograph. The symptoms experienced may be individual or happen altogether but can include complete panic, hysteria, sweating, rapid heart rate, trembling, nausea, difficulty breathing or even a sudden urge to go to the toilet and most often the need to move away or avoid an area where a dog might be.

There are around 6 million dogs in England so there is a very good chance that at anytime, a person with or without cynophobia will come across a dog. If you do have cynophobia this can cause you many problems and may even make a person refuse to leave their house or with children their panic and fear may put them in dangerous situations, such as running into traffic, hiding and refusing to acknowledge the person looking for them, making excuses for not going to school.

Moreover, it can be incredibly difficult for the cynophobic person to form or continue a relationship with people who are dog owners. It can be a difficult fear to overcome. Many people seek therapy through their GP's who can refer them to specialists, but few have the knowledge of exposure therapy. In some instances therapy may focus on identifying early causes for the fear, though this isn't always possible. At the Essex Dog Training Centre we focus on gradual exposure therapy and it may be several sessions before a child actually comes into contact with a dog.

Initially we are contacted by the parents, but can have referrals from doctors or school teachers. Some parents are so worried about how their child will react, that they do not tell them when they are going on their first visit to the training centre. We have had children who have waited for their parent to leave the car and then locked themselves in to avoid the situation. We have had children literally wet or mess themselves when they think a dog may be present. We have even had a small girl whose fear of dogs was so great that it manifested itself in anything 'furry' including touching cuddly toys or hair from a hair brush.

The child is always kept within its comfort zone and never hears negative remarks such as 'don't be silly' or 'this is nothing to worry about' and such like, and children are always taught how to be safe around dogs, but also to have a healthy respect for dogs. Once we have spoken to the children about their fears, we usually have lots of fun games, such as skittles, musical mats, playing with footballs, tennis balls and even dancing to their favourite record. This generally happens at the



beginning of every training session. We have found that this puts the child at ease and gives them another focus other than their fear. A slight competitive edge is always added into the games, which often include the parents, where children can win small prizes. After a few sessions the children get to see dogs, albeit on the screen or through a mirror or glass, which keeps them slightly removed from the children. They are asked to guess the breed of dogs, count the number of times the dogs wags its tail in a friendly fashion etc. We constantly explain to the children some of the things that dogs do and the noises that they make, such as barking. The children are told that dogs don't sing, they don't whistle and they don't play the piano, but they do bark for many reasons, this usually brings a smile to the child's face. Each child is watched very closely to see how they react to various situations, when they see or come into contact with dogs and then the exposure therapy is adapted accordingly.

Different breeds dogs are selected for the exposure programme and their temperaments will vary from extremely passive onto excellent temperament yet busy and active. Dogs are graded from 1 – 10 with one being the most passive and ten being the most active. Dogs are introduced to the children at various stages which at the end of the course gives the child and overall view of how dogs react in the real world. Quite often the children are not aware that they are being gradually de-sensitised with their fear.

At the end of the ten week course (one hour weekly) a child is usually able to touch and brush dogs, walk dogs on a lead and have dogs running towards them and even willingly call dogs towards them. The children are always told at this stage that they are in control and that they are actually helping us to train dogs. There are of course many aspects to helping these children get over their phobia and we are always happy for people to come and watch this in action. The children are invited to watch the display team rehearsing and to attend any of the normal dog training days where up to 80 dogs may attend at any one time. The training centre does not charge any child or parent a fee for this service, it is offered completely free.

Many parents have written or personally thanked us for not only giving the child the confidence to deal with the problem but also giving the family back their lives, which allows them to go to the park, have picnics on the beach and even go on holiday. Some families even go onto have their own dog, which is a massive reward for the volunteer Instructors and dog handlers involved.

Cynophobia classes are free of any charge and take place on a Wednesday evening where Volunteers and their dogs help Children overcome their morbid fear of dogs, under the strict supervision of Chief Instructor, Roy Dyer. Please email info@essexdogtrainingcentre.co.uk or telephone 01277 375131 for more details