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# Noise phobias and fireworks

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**ABSTRACT:** In this article we look at the extent of the problem of fireworks and sound sensitivities in the UK dog population. Different ways of interacting with clients are investigated, along with advice to help clients support their dogs during the firework season. The importance of considering long-term options as well as preparation when puppies are socialised are also explored.

It's that time of year again! Time to get clients to think about the effect of loud noises on their pets, and time to get them thinking about it before 4 or 5 November!

The popularity of fireworks has increased in recent years and now fireworks can be set off at any time of the year, to celebrate birthdays or weddings as well as religious celebrations and various 'New Years'. Fireworks can be a real problem, though, for our dogs. A recent study (Blackwell, Bradshaw & Casey 2013) found that 49% of dogs in the UK have a degree of sound sensitivity, which represents a welfare issue for a large proportion of your clients' dogs.

Our traditional fireworks season can be difficult for dogs with a sound sensitivity; their anxiety levels rise in anticipation of fireworks as they notice shortening day-length, leaves falling off the trees and misty starts to the day. As dogs begin to become increasingly anxious about fireworks well before 5 November, how can we get our clients to start thinking and planning for this annual event?

Raising awareness of the problem of fireworks is an important job for the whole practice team, and practices can make use of a wide variety of ways to interact with clients:

- **Eye-catching noticeboards** for clients coming into the practice can stimulate discussion and remind clients to prepare for the fireworks season.
- **Literature** discussing fireworks and how to help pets can be made

available to complement noticeboards in the waiting room.

- **E-newsletters** are a very useful and direct way to engage with clients, whether to offer advice about helping their pets cope with fireworks or to invite them in for consultations or even to offer product promotions.
- **Client evenings** can be a really useful way to get clients to learn about sound sensitivities and what they can do to support their dogs during the fireworks season. Not only is it a chance for your clients to bond with you, but it is also an opportunity to promote the importance of behaviour products in the practice, such as puzzle feeders, toys and pheromones.
- The power of the **Internet and social media** can be harnessed to interact with clients. This allows practices to remind clients on a daily or weekly basis about the upcoming fireworks season. It can also be used as an education tool to highlight to owners the types of behaviours that dogs may display if they have sensitivity towards loud noises such as fireworks. Ideas for text which can be posted on social media can come from literature already in the practice or sent from companies, and useful posts from company Facebook pages can be shared and liked.
- **Questionnaires** that clients complete in the waiting room or before they visit the practice can help them understand if their dog needs support during the fireworks season. The 'Sounds sensitivity questionnaire'

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developed by Jon Bowen and Jaume Fatjo has been validated and is easy to use. When the questionnaire has been completed, an advice sheet is generated which lets the client understand how their dog copes with unusual sounds as well as guidance to help their dog during fireworks (or thunderstorms). The advice sheet also stimulates the client to visit the practice for extra support as necessary. The questionnaire can be found at <http://www.adaptil.com/uk/Firework-Fear/Assess-your-dogs-fear-of-fireworks>

## What advice should we give clients?

### Provide a den

An important step is to ensure that the dog has a safe haven or den to retreat to – an area where they feel secure. Ideally, this should be in an internal room that is easily accessible and away from windows. The den can be a place that the dog already uses, which is adapted to be as comfortable, dark and quiet as possible, or a man-made temporary option such as a cardboard box.

Preparing a den in advance allows the dog to get used to the area and accept it as a safe place to be. If using a crate, the door should always be left open to allow easy and instant access/exit. Whatever

form of den is chosen, it is also advisable to use towels and/blankets to cover the area and reduce the sounds and lights from the fireworks. This message can be relayed to your clients in text or written form in newsletters, or visually via posters or even a mock-up of a den in the waiting room.

### Adaptil®

The use of Adaptil® (a synthetic copy of the dog appeasing pheromone) has been shown to reduce anxiety and help dogs cope with challenging situations, including firework events, as demonstrated by Sheppard & Mills (2003). Please note that Adaptil reduces the intensity of the dog's fear response and should be used alongside other measures to manage or treat sound sensitivities. As dogs pick up on clues that fireworks are expected, their anxiety levels may begin to rise in anticipation of the event. Introducing an Adaptil® diffuser (or using an Adaptil® collar) in October can help to combat this anxiety build-up.

If clients visit a practice immediately before an expected firework event, advising use of the collar or spray may be most helpful, as these will start to work quickly. Bear in mind, though, that the ability to reduce fear responses may be suppressed if the dog is already anxious.

## Advice for clients on the night

- Ensure that dogs are taken out for a walk/to the toilet *before* it gets dark to avoid having to take them out later during the fireworks.
- Do not try to soothe or punish the dog, as this may increase the intensity of the emotional experience or reward inappropriate behaviour, but instead consider distraction with a chew toy, food-stuffed toy or a game.
- Keep curtains closed, and have the television or radio on while fireworks are going off.
- Stay with the dog, especially if the owner knows that they are a source of comfort for the animal.

## What about medications?

Short-term use of certain medications can help enable a patient to cope with a predictable event, such as fireworks, while long-term treatment can assist in the application of behavioural modification techniques over a period of weeks and months (Bowen & Heath 2005). However, Estelles *et al.* (2005) found that, when using medications, owners were less likely to implement behaviour modifications, so it is important to emphasise the continued use of the measures already described along with medication.

Drugs commonly used in practice for short-term therapy include benzodiazepines. This class of drug is utilised because of their short-term anxiolytic effects as well as their ability to impair the individual's ability to remember events that are experienced. As responses to benzodiazepines are highly individual, at least one trial dose should be given at a quiet, non-stressful time for the dog, in order to identify the dose effect, speed of onset and any adverse side effects.

It should be noted that the use of acepromazine (ACP) has been associated with increased sensitisation to noise and a blocking of the motor ability of the individual; therefore a dog that has had ACP administered is aware of the loud noises but unable to move away from them (Bowen & Heath 2005). The use of ACP can therefore worsen a dog's response to the fearful stimulus.



## Last-minute clients

All practices experience the last-minute client despite their best efforts to get clients to prepare for fireworks before the start of November. It is important to remember that these clients can still be helped with advice for the night as above but, if they haven't prepared a den, they cannot realistically expect their dog to use it until it is happy with that space! The use of pheromones will help reduce the dog's anxiety during the fireworks event but any rising anxiety the dog has already experienced will not have been affected. In these situations, clients may consider using certain 'calming' nutraceuticals, such as L-tryptophan, alongside environmental and pheromone support.

## Long-term advice

It can be difficult to persuade owners to consider how to help their dogs in the long term, rather than opting for a quick fix each fireworks season, but it will make a difference to that dog's future welfare. Desensitisation and counter-conditioning have been shown to be safe and effective methods for treating sound sensitivities; the 'Sounds Scary' CD (from <http://www.soundtherapy4pets.co.uk/scary.html> but also available on iTunes), for example, is a good home tool to consider recommending to clients. However, the dog needs to be relaxed during this training, which means that training needs to begin after the risk of fireworks being set off has passed, which usually means in the spring. Client support throughout the process is recommended, as the steps required need to be taken at the right pace for the dog and performed in the right way. Referral to a qualified behaviourist should be considered. The Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors has a list of qualified members, showing the area of the country in which they work, on its website at [www.apbc.org.uk](http://www.apbc.org.uk)

## Prevention

Prevention is always better than cure, and practices can offer preventative behaviour advice. This may be during vaccination consultations, at puppy clinics or classes or even just in puppy information given to owners. We need to help owners understand that their puppies learn about lots of different stimuli during their socialisation period. Exposing them to objects and sounds

that we expect them to encounter as adults, and making these experiences positive, therefore sets them up to be able to cope in the future.

Since puppies start to hear during their third week, breeders can play a role in exposing young puppies to sounds expected in a normal family home. The Puppy Socialisation Plan developed by the Kennel Club and Dogs Trust ([www.thepuppyplan.com](http://www.thepuppyplan.com)) gives advice to breeders (and then new owners) on how to socialise and educate puppies up to the age of 16 weeks to help prevent fear-related behaviour problems later in life. The use of sound-therapy programmes can help with habituation to various sounds, including fireworks. The 'Sounds Sociable' CD (<http://www.soundtherapy4pets.co.uk/sociable.html>) can be used in this instance (or is available via download from iTunes).

## Summary

Remember:

- speak to your clients sooner rather than later
- use your waiting room and social media to reach out and educate owners on the importance of a puppy's socialisation period and of longer-term programmes for adult dogs, such as desensitisation or counter-conditioning after the fireworks season has finished and well before the next one comes round.

The fireworks season can be a difficult time of year for many adult dogs. The good news is that there is a wide range of options and tools available and, by working with them, we can make a real difference to the welfare of sensitive dogs. [vni](#)

### References

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## Find out more

Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors: [www.apbc.org.uk](http://www.apbc.org.uk)

The Puppy Socialisation Plan: [www.thepuppyplan.com](http://www.thepuppyplan.com)

'Sounds Scary' and 'Sounds Sociable' CDs:

<http://www.soundtherapy4pets.co.uk/scary.html>

'Sounds sensitivity questionnaire': <http://www.adaptil.com/uk/Firework-Fear/Assess-your-dogs-fear-of-fireworks>

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## NEWS REVIEW

by Jean Turner

### *Dogs: Their Secret Lives – Aggressive behaviour*

From this fascinating series on Channel 4 TV have come some gems of information. Mark Evans, who presents the programme, referred repeatedly to the horrors of puppy farms – surely puppy factories would be a better term? – and the lack of socialisation of puppies and the problems this brings.

Professor Daniel Mills stated that he tells his students that, if they are against racism, they should also be against 'breedism'. How sensible! We are all against breed-specific legislation under the terms of the Dangerous Dogs Act. In practice we are all aware that any dog is potentially dangerous, in the wrong hands and with the wrong, or a lack of, training. The particular breed does not indicate a hazardous or dangerous dog.

Hopefully our clients will realise that as much care should be taken when acquiring a dog as when purchasing a house or car.

Dog behaviour is the subject of one of our articles this month: Anne McBride writes about 'Dogs and children: match made in heaven or hell?' on page 329.