

From Fear to Friendship: A Gentle Guide to Dog Confidence Parent Information Sheet

Why is My Child Screaming When They See a Dog?

This reaction is a **phobic fear response**. It's not a tantrum, attention-seeking, or misbehaviour. It's the brain going into "**danger mode**."

Even if the dog is friendly, your child's body might respond as if it's life-threatening — this is driven by a part of the brain called the **amygdala**.

What Could Have Triggered This?

- A past scary moment (e.g., a bark, jump, or bite)
- A loud noise or sudden movement
- Seeing someone else frightened of dogs
- No previous experience with dogs at all

What's Happening in the Brain:

- **Amygdala** = sets off the fear alarm
- **Hippocampus** = remembers bad dog experiences
- **Prefrontal Cortex** = needs calm to work properly
- **Insula** = turns up the emotional volume (like anxiety)

What You Can Do at Home:

1. Use Play to Build Confidence

- Play pretend games with dog toys
- Draw or colour friendly dogs
- Give a toy dog a daily "job" (e.g., guarding a book)

2. Build Emotional Language

- Use a *feelings chart* (I feel scared / safe / curious)
- Talk about what your child notices: "What's the dog doing?"

3. **Watch & Wait (Don't Push)**

- Respect your child's pace — **don't force contact**
- Celebrate small steps like *looking*, *talking*, or *drawing*

4. **Practice Calm-Down Tools**

- Blow bubbles
- Belly breathing
- Squeeze balls or tactile toys

What School is Doing

- Gradual, gentle exposure (books, toys, photos)
- Clear routines and pre-warning before any dog presence
- Calming strategies ready if your child gets overwhelmed
- Optional meet-and-greet (later, when child is ready)