

HUMANE SOCIETY OF BROWARD COUNTY

Behavior Modification Handout



Introducing Your Pet to a Stranger

If your pet is cautious of meeting new people and has reacted negatively in the past, before continuing to allow your dog around strangers you should manage your pet's stress by desensitizing this behavior. Your pet is in most cases likely experiencing fear and reducing this fearful response will help your pet be more accepting of people he may not know. Strangers can be scary! We have all heard of "stranger danger" and your dog may have these same feelings. If your pet has not reacted negatively and likes to meet new people you can keep them comfortable by following some basic guidelines when around or meeting strangers!

Starting Off on the Right Paw / Managing Your Environment

Working on some foundation cues will help you maintain control of your dog and allow your dog to be calm and focus on the task at hand rather than the scary stranger. Your pet's brain functions much like our own and when they are having an emotional response (fear) to something it becomes more difficult to concentrate and perform known cues such as "watch me" or "sit". Practicing these cues frequently can help your pet develop a conditioned reflex or something they just do and don't really have to think about too hard. It becomes automatic. The same thing applies to brain function as the pre-frontal cortex takes over and begins task solving, in turn the emotional response function takes a back seat and is no longer front and center. The two separate parts of the brain do not work well together if we can trigger one then we can dilute the other. The goal is to dilute the emotional response by engaging your dog's task solving functions.

Name Recognition

Use this exercise to ensure your pet will recognize and respond to his name in any situation. Good name recognition is an important safeguard for your pet just like a good recall. Start by saying your dog's name frequently and rewarding him when he looks at you. Positive reinforcement should be a small food reward or whatever motivates your dog. Once your dog is reliably looking at you each time you say his name add a different tone to your voice: playful, excited, rushed, loud, soft, happy, angry. Your voice naturally changes with daily life and reflects whatever may be going on at the time. Conditioning your dog to respond to his name by fluctuating your voice will reassure him no matter what you sound like good things (food treats) are going to happen. Never abuse this trust by calling your dog to you for punishment. If your dog needs to be interrupted from an undesired behavior use an interruption cue such as clapping your hands loudly and go towards your dog to move him away or distract him from the environment or ongoing behavior. Name recognition and recall cues must always result in a positive outcome for your dog to be successful.

Watch Me

Pair name recognition with a watch me cue for a powerful attention tool. This tool will help to calm your dog in stressful situations and build confidence and develop trust.

- Encourages attention

- Helps your dog focus
- Hold a treat in front of your dog's nose (almost touching), and slowly move the treat from his nose to your nose.
- As eye contact is made say "good dog" and finish by delivering the food treat. If your dog is uncomfortable with direct eye contact focus on another facial feature.
- Reward anytime your dog looks at you.
- Once your dog is reliably looking at you add the verbal cue: "Buster, Watch me" = dog looks at you = say "Good Dog" = deliver food treat.
- Practice this exercise often.

Sit

- Teach your dog to sit instead of jumping up.
- Hold a small treat just in front of your dog's nose.
- Take treat upwards and backwards, over the top of dog's head, slowly.
- As head follows food up and back the rear end will drop into a sitting position.
- As soon as your dog sits say "good dog" and immediately deliver food treat.
- Once dog is reliably offering behavior (sitting) add a verbal cue, say dog's name then cue: "Buster sit" = dog sits = say "Good Dog" = deliver food treat.
- To further encourage this behavior at home simply wait for the behavior to happen during everyday life and be prepared to positively reinforce with a small food treat. This is called free shaping. Free shaping is also a great primer to work on before you begin to teach sit and a great way to keep the behavior strong after training the cue.

Desensitizing and Counter Conditioning

Having and using really yummy food treats to reinforce your pet when meeting new people will help them to associate "When I meet someone new, good things happen to me, maybe meeting new people is not so bad. In fact, I like to meet people because then I get chicken!" that is the counter- conditioning part. Changing your pet's thinking from, strangers are scary to strangers make chicken happen is our goal. The desensitizing is working in small easy to manage situations (baby steps). Giving your dog space, time and the ability to say "nope, I'm not ready" is crucial in building trust and confidence in your pet. Instead of going to the pet store first time out go and meet the neighbor and let your dog approach at their own pace all the while offering small bites of chicken or another tasty treat. Let your neighbor have a few treats that they can toss gently to the dog. Taking a treat from the hand may be too scary at first and we want to avoid increasing fear responses. Desensitizing and counter- conditioning is a fairly complicated behavior modification and if your pet has significant fear issues with meeting strangers or has ever shown signs of aggression you should consult with a behaviorist or a professional trainer. This information is intended for pets that may be shy and just need a little extra help or you just want to make sure your happy- to- meet- new- people puppy stays that way. It is a good idea to always closely supervise anytime your pet is meeting someone new to ensure the greeting is as stress free as possible.

Avoiding the Pitfalls

You should never punish your cat or dog for having fearful responses during these introduction periods. Let your pet dictate the pace, avoid forcing your pet into a situation they may not feel comfortable with. Socializing your pet when they are young is the best way to ensure a happy well-adjusted adult that will be more accepting of people and look forward to meeting them. A well socialized pet is much less stressed about their world in general and will experience less fear when the unexpected happens. Remember slow and steady wins the race!

Tips and Hints

Now that you have a plan in place here are some tips and hints that will make the experience even easier.

- Remember, animals are spatially sensitive and every animal will feel the need for his own space. Avoid confrontations in confined areas like doorways, hallways, bathrooms and cars.
- Always use positive reinforcement (special food treats and kind words of encouragement) to reward your pets for interacting appropriately.
- Remember, slow and easy gets the job done! Don't rush your dog or cat by forcing them to be in close contact and let them proceed at their own pace.
- Learn to recognize your pet's body postures and what they mean. Slow down or stop a training session completely if your pet is showing signs of stress.