



HUMANE SOCIETY OF BROWARD COUNTY

Behavior Modification Handout

Appropriate Play Behaviors

Play is very important for your pet. In young animals, play helps them to develop social skills and bite inhibition and in older animals play enriches their environment and helps them burn off excess energy. Play can also be great practice for predatory behaviors: the stalk, chase, catch, kill sequence, and finding the fine line between good natured rough housing and inappropriate bullying behavior can be a challenge. Supervising your pets closely and being observant during play time is a great tool for encouraging appropriate play behaviors.

Starting Off on the Right Paw / Managing Your Environment

Games and activities with your pet should be kept within acceptable arousal levels. If your pet becomes overly excited during play, take a break and let him calm down. Rough housing and wrestling with your pet may seem like great fun but if you are having a problem with play biting or your pet is too rough during play these activities will only make the problem worse. Play should be kept low key and under control. Keep in mind when playing with a puppy or kitten that they grow up fast and play behaviors practiced during this important growth period will follow them into adulthood. When your pet reaches adulthood he will be bigger, stronger and faster and so will his play behaviors; so train them early about boundaries and self control.

Encouraging Appropriate Play Behaviors

Some animals are naturally adept at reading another's body language and inhibiting themselves when playing, while other animals may not be as good at these social skills. Here are some good exercises for impulse control your pet can practice (while most of these exercises are geared towards dogs your cat or kitten can practice self control too by working on these cues):

- Name Recognition – This may sound silly and you are thinking “of course my pet knows his name”, but unless he is responding reliably or over 80 % of the time he may not know it as well as he should. Practice calling his name and getting eye contact and then reward him with a food treat.
- Eye contact – Having your pet's attention is important especially if you are about to give a cue or direction. Use positive reinforcement (food treats, play time) so your pet looks at you eagerly and often for instructions.
- Place - This cue is a great way for your pet to take a time out. Pick a mat or rug your dog can lay on and be comfortable and use positive reinforcement to get him to want to go to the mat (feed him food treats on the mat or rug). Train him to lie down on the mat to take a quick break.
- Wait and Stay – These cues will help improve your dog's self control by teaching him to wait for things (sit politely to go out or before dinner is served).

- Collar touches / holding – Your dog should be happy for you to touch and hold on to his collar but for most dogs this posture is confrontational and can be scary. Train a collar touch by using positive reinforcement (food treats) whenever you touch his collar. Start slow by just tapping the collar or by just reaching for the neck area then work up to holding the collar gently. You never know when you may have to grab your dog’s collar in an emergency.
- Polite greeting “Nice to meet you” – Your dog should sit while greeting guests or meeting strangers. You can teach this easily by not allowing anyone to approach your dog unless he is sitting and have them offer food treats for a polite greeting. You need to start with a good solid sit cue before training this behavior.

Tips and Hints

Get to know your pet’s play style and pick appropriate playmates. A Chihuahua may not enjoy playing with a Boxer or a Great Dane! Learn about and understand your pet’s body language so you know when your pet is trying to tell you that he is stressed or nervous and is not having fun anymore. Interrupt play often and reward your dog for coming to you with a food treat. Play can escalate quickly and frequent breaks will help to keep the levels of arousal within controllable limits. Don’t wait for a scuffle or a fight to happen; be proactive and supervise your pet so you can intervene, diffuse a tense situation and redirect the behavior. It is also important to know when to let dogs play and not constantly be worried about them. Fun often sounds fierce.

Avoiding the Pitfalls

- You should never use physical punishment when correcting undesired behaviors.
- Punishment may also create other fearful behaviors. Fearful behaviors will influence future training and make learning difficult for your pet.
- Your pet may learn to be afraid of you.
- He may become defensive and develop aggressive behaviors.
- He could shy away from physical interactions with you, such as not wanting to be petted.
- Sign up for a basic dog obedience class (you can call 954-266-6819 to register for a low cost class at the Humane Society of Broward County).
- Ensure your dog or puppy, cat or kitten is getting enough exercise and play time (see the Exercise handout for more info).
- Have your pet spayed or neutered.
- Has your pet always enjoyed playtime and recently changed the behavior and has become grouchy or avoided playtime altogether? Time for a trip to the vet to get a check up. Your veterinarian can evaluate your pet for any medical issues that may indicate a problem.