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BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION FOR DOGS AFRAID OF PEOPLE OR PETS

G. Landsberg G, Hunthausen W, Ackerman L 2003 Handbook of Behavior Problems of the Dog and Cat. Saunders, Edinburgh # 2003, Elsevier Science Limited. All rights reserved.

There are many different stimuli that can frighten your dog or lead to an aggressive response. Although fear can lead to avoidance and escape attempts, the dog that is defensive or aggressive when it is frightened can pose a serious danger. This handout is designed to develop a program for improving or resolving fear of animate stimuli, such as people and other animals. Fear can be generalized to all people or animals of a certain type (e.g., children, strange dogs) but can also be quite specific so that fear may only be exhibited with specific people (e.g., delivery men with beards) or in specific situations.

Treatment of fear

In simple terms, the pet must be repeatedly exposed to the fearful stimulus until it sees that there is nothing to fear and settles down. If the association with the stimulus can be turned into one that is positive, the pet may actually develop a positive attitude when exposed to the stimulus.

Desensitization is used in combination with counterconditioning to change a pet's attitude or 'feeling' about the stimulus from one that is negative to one that is positive. Desensitization involves controlled exposure to situations or stimuli that are weaker or milder than will cause fear. Counterconditioning is then used to change the dog's response to the stimulus (person, other animal) by associating the dog's favored rewards with the stimulus. The dog is then gradually introduced to similar but progressively more intense stimuli paired together with the presentation of the favored reward. If an inappropriate response (fear, aggression, attempts at retreat) is exhibited, then an attempt should be made to interrupt the situation and calm the dog, at which point a reward can be given for success.

Response substitution is used to train the dog to perform or display a new acceptable response (e.g., sit) each time it is exposed to the stimulus. Again, rather than attempting to overcome an intense response, the training should be set up to expose the dog with stimuli of reduced intensity to ensure a successful outcome. A head halter and leash can be used to ensure success and both the release (negative reinforcement) and positive reinforcement can be used to mark and reinforce an acceptable relaxed response.

Owner responses such as a raised voice, anxiety, fear, or punishment will only serve to heighten the pet's fear or anxiety. Similarly, a fearful, anxious, or threatening stimulus to the dog will further aggravate anxiety. Be certain to retrain only with calm, controlled stimuli. The goal of training is to reinforce appropriate, desirable responses. Therefore, it is critical that rewards are not given and that the stimulus and the dog are not removed from the situation until the dog is calm and settled.

Steps for treating a pet that is afraid of animate stimuli (people, other animals)

1. Identify all stimuli and situations that cause the pet to be fearful (e.g., tall men, loud women, young children playing).
2. Prevent the dog from experiencing the stimuli except during retraining sessions.
3. If there is aggression associated with the fear, then your dog should be trained to wear a head halter or basket muzzle so that safety during exposure exercises can be ensured.
4. Train the dog to relax or settle on command in the absence of any fear-evoking stimuli (see our handout on Settle training). Train only in locations where the dog is calm, focused, and has minimal distractions. The initial training should be done by family members with whom the pet is calmest, most controlled, and responsive. The head halter can be used to ensure immediate success.
5. Once the dog will reliably settle, focus on the family member, and accept rewards in a variety of environments, then training can progress to stimulus exposure, desensitization, and counterconditioning and response substitution.

6. Often, a familiar dog or a familiar person can be used as the initial training stimulus to ensure that the dog will show a relaxed and positive response in the problem environment (e.g., greeting other dogs on the street, greeting strangers at the door).

7. Reinforcer selection: for both counterconditioning and response substitution, the dog's favored rewards should be used. You should make a list of all the rewards your dog may enjoy and save the top few for training. In fact, to increase the motivational value of the rewards, you should deprive the dog of these favored rewards except for these training sessions.

8. You will need to develop a gradient for introduction to the fearful stimulus so that initial exposures are mild. Setting up sessions with good stimulus control can be difficult and take a great degree of forethought but is essential for successful counter conditioning and response substitution training.

(a) First, make a list of all the stimuli that might incite fear or anxiety. Stimuli may be visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and on rare occasions associated with taste. There may be multiple stimuli to which you will have to desensitize and counter condition. For example, a dog that shows a fear response to children on bicycles riding past the front of the home may show anxiety related to the bicycles, the children, the actions, the sounds, the location, and the owner's response.

(b) Once each stimulus is identified, a means of controlling the stimuli along a gradient of increasingly stronger stimuli must be developed. A gradient can be designed using distance (from far enough away to cause minimal response and gradually closer), similarity (e.g., from least similar age or size to most similar), activity level (from no movement to high activity), or location (from most calm and controllable location to most difficult or distracted), and with different handlers (from trainer to family member with least control)

(c) To ensure minimal fear with the initial exposure, be certain to begin at a time and location where the pet is calmest and train with the family member or trainer who can best calm the dog.

(d) Advance along the gradients very slowly. If you happen to proceed through a step too quickly and the pet responds fearfully, relax, and settle down the pet. By using a leash and head halter, it is often possible to calm and distract the dog with a pull upward to get eye contact with the owner and a gradual release. Once the fear response has ceased for five seconds or more, move the person or animal back about five feet. Then, have the person or animal advance one foot, give the pet a reinforcer, and stop the session for one to 24 hours depending on the magnitude of the fear response.

(e) The favored reward is paired with success and calmness at each new step along the gradient. Always end each session on a positive note and start at that level or below with subsequent sessions.

Fear/anxiety toward people

For aggression toward people, stimuli to consider that might lead to anxiety include visual cues such as physical characteristics (e.g., sex, age, race, dress, infirmities), attitude and actions, olfactory cues (odor), and auditory cues. As people begin to interact with your dog, tactile cues may also be a factor to consider so progress slowly with each new stimulus.

Fear/anxiety toward other animals

For aggression toward other animals, stimuli to consider that might lead to anxiety include visual cues such as physical characteristics (e.g., species, breed/color, size, age), postures, facial expressions and actions, olfactory cues (odors, pheromones), and auditory cues (e.g., growl). As the other animal begins to interact with your dog, tactile cues may also be a factor to consider, so progress slowly with each new stimulus. Handler/location cues: as mentioned, the cues and responses of the owner as well as the location or situation in which the exposure takes place might also have an impact on whether the pet is more or less likely to be anxious. Use a person who is confident, calm, and in good control to begin training sessions and use a location where success is most likely.

Example

A dog might be most fearful and show aggression toward young boys at a distance of 15 m or less while playing in front of the house. Four gradients could be used for the boys: distance between the dog and the stimulus, appearance of the stimulus, location of the stimulus, and actions of the stimulus. Along the distance gradient, the exposure sessions would start at 15 m (i.e., beyond that which would evoke the fear response) and progress toward the dog. The appearance gradient might progress from adults to teenagers to familiar boys to unfamiliar boys. The activity gradient might begin with the stimulus standing quietly and progress gradually toward more intense play,

and a location gradient might begin with desensitization and counter conditioning away from home before moving to your own property.

In this example, if the fear was toward boys on bicycles or roller blades, then desensitization and counter conditioning with the bicycle or roller blades will also be necessary. One method might be to use a family member for training the dog to have a positive association with the bicycle and then riding the bicycle, before combining the two stimuli (unfamiliar children and bicycle riding).