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Reactivity in Dogs

This is quite a broad spectrum to consider when working with the canine companion. There are very different scales of reactions to very different triggers that the dog finds either stimulating or threatening.

A reaction can be considered to be an event, you react to the sun rising so get up and start the day, you react to a cuddle from your grandchildren, you react to the sadness of a friend struggling through a break up. Your dog reacts to you getting out their lead, they react to the smell and sound of their meal being prepared, they react to you sitting on the sofa and getting up for a fuss.

So, a reaction as defined by Oxford Dictionary is

- something done, felt, or thought in response to a situation or event or
- a person's ability to respond physically and mentally to external stimuli or
- a chemical process in which substances act mutually on each other and are changed into different substances, or one substance changes into other substances or
- a force exerted in opposition to an applied force.

Thus, reacting is part of being alive, what people usually refer to with regards reactivity in dogs is an abnormal reaction to what to most dogs is a normal occurrence. These can be but are not limited to

- another dog
- a large dog
- a small dog
- a black dog
- a stranger
- a person wearing a hat
- a truck
- a van
- a motorcycle
- a doorbell
- a leaf
- a bang
- leaving the dog
- having the lead on
- having a harness on
- vet visits
- car rides
- touching the collar

and the list goes on. For those people that have a dog that copes with living in a human world well the idea that a dog can react quite significantly to a bang, or a leaf falling seems quite weird. However, for the family that deals with a dog that reacts more significantly to any of the list and more then it can be a nerve-wracking time for the handlers.

If you remember anything – a dog can only react like a dog – they can be no more or less than what they are.

I call this type of behaviour hyper-reactivity. There are many ways to work with the individual dog and often calling in a skilled behaviourist/trainer can help to manage and lessen the dog's reactivity over the course of a few months. If a trainer or behaviourist indicates that it can be sorted in one session they are probably going to use aversive techniques that may inhibit their reaction initially, however by using aversive methods/techniques (things that the dog finds threatening or painful) you may find that there is fall out.

Building up Positive Associations

By working with the dog in the home/garden and any other area the dog finds ok then you can begin training the dog to respond to the marker or clicker in these environments by using the 'click and reward' initially, then by training a behaviour, adding a cue and then asking for those behaviours. Training relieves anxiety, and often in my experience this supports the behaviour modification programme I put in place for the dog and their handlers.

Keeping a record

If you don't recall where you started with the dog, how do you establish the improvements. You are not writing a report every day, but a comment such as saw a dog at 5 metres hackles, interest no barking! This may be massive. You will have your 'bad days' and so will the dog and by keeping a record you can establish if the behaviour modification is going in the right direction.

Proofing the Behaviour

So your dog does a fab hand touch, middle, sit, reflex to name in the house and the garden, however when you take the dog out the front door it's as though it forgets it. This is because there hasn't been any proofing of the behaviours. With some dogs it can be that the 'front door' can be highly stimulating and so just being with them, waiting until they offer a calm behaviour and rewarding that you are working on the dog coping mechanisms.

If a dog doesn't eat it is often conflicted. This means that the environment (includes you, other humans, your walking kit, the treats, the wind, the area, other dogs or animals) is too stimulating to concentrate on the task of eating. I often explain this to my clients in that when I used to go for an interview for a job such as a lecturing job, or Head of School job, or meeting with a group of influential people on a project – I could not eat due to the butterflies in my stomach. I was fine after, however prior to, and during I was so nervous and anxious I could not even bear the thought of food. Transfer this to your dog and you can see why 'that dog on the horizon' creates an anxious state of mind with your dog, that they can only focus on the feeling the anxiety and the stimulus (the other dog).

The first guidance that I give to owners after saying this may be a slow rehabilitation process is the following – practice the foundation behaviours of sit, down, hand touch, eye contact and reflex to name. We further add in the ‘Stay’ and the ‘Relax to Mat’, as this gives the owners time to practice these behaviours before taking them on the road in the face of what the dog finds ‘threatening or stimulating’. Once you have worked on these with your dog and began to build up their calm skills you are then going to begin to click the ‘state of mind’ that is a ‘calm state’¹. A clicker is best for this type of training at first (you can transfer to a voice marker later)².

Klaus

Klaus was for want of a word, distraught, when he saw other dogs. He was an unusual case as we could work at a distance from dogs, off the lead he would play with dogs that he met according to his owners. Klaus was overly reactive to people, bikes, dogs and we found out on one walk horses too. So, we practiced techniques with people and bikes first, horses as and when and dogs as we saw them. He worked better at a distance of about 5 metres, however, could cope with certain dogs at a closer range. When I introduced him to my dogs and did desensitisation work he was fairly focused on the dogs, what happened in this session was Klaus’s Mom took my Rottweiler for a walk, I had my husband as the other handler and by them walking in front with the dogs, me with Klaus’s dad behind, he seemed to be able to cope with this situation better. Basically he could see his Mom, all dogs were under control and Dad was calm too. Over the course of a few months, we worked with reading Klaus, giving feedback with a marker word (Good) and he can now see a dog and get past him without ‘pontificating’, he also is taking treats now which he could not do in the presence of another dog. Klaus is now working through the proofing stage whereby he has affection, a head scratch, chest rub, or a piece of his favoured chicken.

Stage 1 is to simply build up the foundation behaviours above so that out of 5 behaviours the dog is getting 4. This is 80% success rate. If he is getting 100% well brilliant.

Stage 2

Working on the stimulus – I’m going to take putting the lead on. A lovely dog Jim doesn’t like his Dad to put the lead on him, he backs up and growls. He allows Mom to do it. The dog is a Cypriot Dali Rescue dog and with my experience with these dogs there are some severe reactions to men. This is that men (remember that they secrete a hormone testosterone that the dog can smell) have had very negative associations with them, either no affection, rough handling, affection then punishment – this is one of the worst as it truly builds distrust, and beatings. Initial stages would be rather than Dad trying to get the lead on, Mom pops his ‘day suit’ on for his walks, so Dad

can just pick up the lead and go, as once out with Dad it is fine. This links back to the trauma that most ‘rescue’ dogs other than those that have been surrendered have suffered, by being captured and it being a feeling of being trapped, tightened noose round their necks and usually a man on the other end of the lead.

¹ A clicker is a very simple piece of equipment that provides a clear simple form of communication to a non-verbal species (the dog), from a verbal species (humans). It simply says to the dog ‘you got it right’.

² Marker word – this can be used when a clicker is not available, or the dog has appropriate behaviours, and works to ‘mark’ the ‘you got that right’ behaviour. It can be ‘Bravo’, ‘Good’, ‘Yes’, ‘Yep’ or even ‘Oranges’ if you like

Let's go through the stages of getting on a lead.

- Collar
- Harness
- Lead
- Click of collar/harness and lead
- Restriction of movement and the ability to flee
- Handler pulling

These are very basic – so with Jimmy's Dad, initially I suggested that the dog have a trailing house lead. The reason is that the 'act' of getting the lead on, was aversive to Jimmy. Dad was being patient and kind, but the past overshadowed the present with the lead and collar act that Dad wanted to do. Mom he trusts more at this moment in time. Dad can then pick up and go, rather than setting Jimmy up to be stressed prior to a walk. Remember walks can happen once a day, twice a day so repeating this behaviour keeps putting 'money' in Jimmy's negative experience bank account.

What was suggested was building up the following:

- Lead is on the floor, any interaction with the lead gets a click and treat
- Lead moves around on the floor, any interaction with the lead gets a click and treat
- When Jimmy is by the side of his Dad, the sound of the 'clip', gets a further click and treat, this can be repeated a few times.
- When Jimmy comes for a fuss, just holding the collar/harness gently with one finger (like you are going to clip a lead on) gets a click and treat. This also works to desensitise this area for recall work later (double bonus).

Above all – in this slow and steady wins the race. A lead and a man may have such a negative feeling for Jimmy that it's going to take lots of repetitions to gain his confidence and trust. It is ABOUT THE DOG! Not the human at this point.

When working this way so you are surfing the 'threshold' point, you want to give the dog an opportunity to walk away, go get a drink, do a pee or poop or just go and rest. Rushing it will undo all the work you have done to this point.

Stage 3

Overtime what will happen is lead = good feelings, Dad + Lead = good feelings. We have had dogs in our home that have took a long time upwards of a year to work through the negative experiences, yes there are some easier wins, however it is a sweet moment when the Jimmy's Dad will be able to go get the lead, Jimmy goes over, Dad clips it on, then Jimmy has a pat, scratch or treat, and then they go on the walk. It will happen.

So you are asking is there a quick fix – nope. It's about breaking the elements down and working through them individually before adding them together and by training alternative behaviours (foundation behaviours), you are able to communicate effectively with your dog and often take the 'lead' from them as to what they wanted to do.

Reactivity to Dogs

Now this is a very large area. Some dogs it is to small dogs, some dogs it is to black dogs, some dogs it is to every dog, even a pony that is the size of a dog.

Where to start

When I work a behavioural case, I often want to see the handling skills of the owner first. This can easily be done by videoing each owner handling the dog on a walk, what are the owners reinforcing, what 'hidden' signals are they giving to the dog.

I have an overly reactive dog called Bear, my personal PITA dog. He has taught me so much about the environment and communication with him.

This is where I'm going to ask you to keep the metrics of the issue – in other words using a notebook or phone app, you will keep the dog type, distance, on or off lead, man or woman with the dog, weather etc. You will record their behaviour so that you have a base line to work from. You are then going to keep this record as you work through and minimise the reactivity to the stimulus (the dog).

Stage 1

Metrics as above

Video footage of any/all handlers that take the dog for a walk.

Analysis of the video footage when a reaction occurs, what did you do, when did you do it, why did you do it (for the dog or for you) and how did you do it, where did you do it (distance)?

Stage 2

Working through the foundation exercises and 'marking/clicking' for calm behaviours in the house, garden and front of house or when there is no stimulus.

Build up as much calmness outside in the environment.

Expose to the stimulus further away than your original metric. Observe behaviours, click when calm. If the dog can take a treat, reward when calm too.

Bear

Bear was not always over-reactive, he was mounted by a male shepherd at 18 months old when I as fostering him and it just switched that switch, so before I had a very sociable dog, who loved dogs, was adverse to people.

After this ONE incident I had a monster. Fine with the resident dogs, fine with his family, gentle with the grandchildren but still at 10 can pontificate when he sees a dog that is eyeballing him out in the 'world'. We have now got to the point where he will let any dog in the back with a specific cue from me, even ones in for dog to dog aggression rehabilitation.

This goes to the point about their ability to control their environment. Bear knows that the 'back' is secure, there are certain rules and boundaries, but outside is unknown with unknown owners with unknown handling skills and unknown dogs.

Interestingly my friend Angelena, can bring a dog in for foster as he trusts Angelena, and that dog he does not react to outside whether I've collected at the charity shop, her home or she's come to drop the dog off at mine. So, he's assessing all the time. Bear is no fool and all he is doing is keeping me and his family of dogs safe.

Stage 3

You are now going to go closer with the stimulus (avoid pushing this part) if a dog comes over off lead and your dog reacts, sadly you need to start again, as your dog has probably gone over threshold and is reacting, without thinking. AT any time, allow the dog to take a sniff break, pee break, water break at any time. Avoid tightening up the lead/line that you have on your dog.

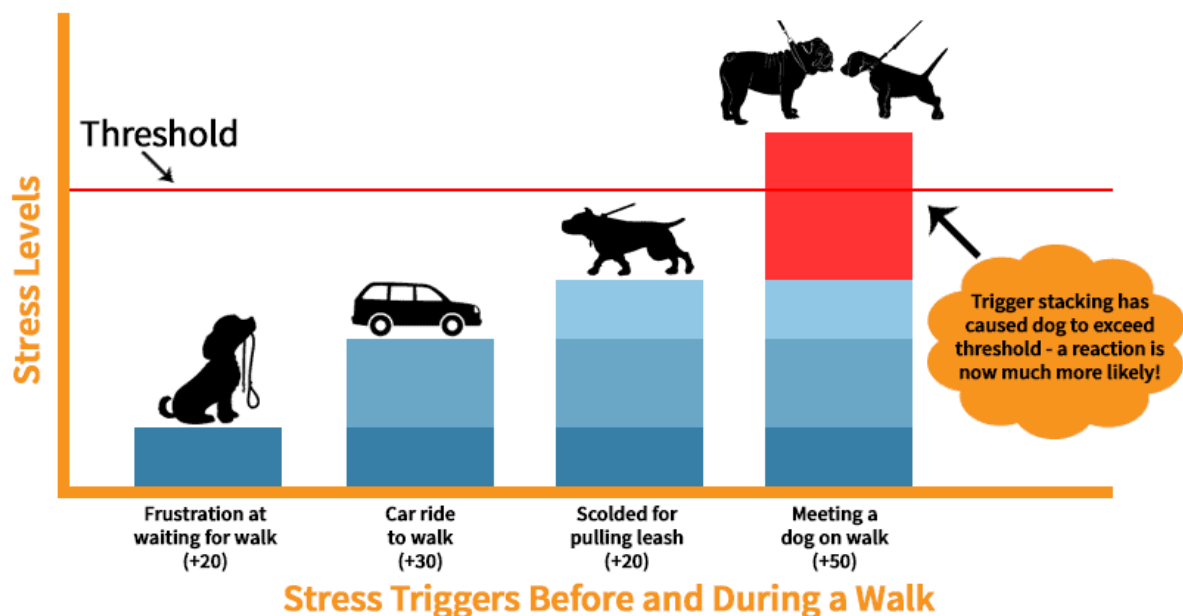
If your dog sees the other dog and is calm then click and reward

If your dog sees the other dog and chooses to walk further away, click and reward

If your dog watches the other dog, sniffs, watches, sniffs (you can help by scattering a few tidbits) but remains calm then click this behaviour.

Observe the distance, keep a log of this as it's important on the next outing to give more distance than the last one achieved in order to set the dog up for success. So if today you managed 3 metres without an outburst, then tomorrow start at 4 metres. Always, always set your dog up for success.

The sniffing, drinking, eating, peeing etc can contribute to 'recovery' sessions in that they maintain the stress levels to below threshold.



Stage 4

If you have friends with dogs (and your friends can control the dogs and they are quite calm) then you can start the walking game.

You have managed to work through the stages whereby your dog gives you feedback and either wants to gain more distance from the dog, or is quite calm at about 2 metres.

You are going to start by allowing both dogs to gain scent information from each other so this is walking at 2 metres or more behind the dog at the front. Observe both dogs and if you need to increase this distance initially then do so. After a few minutes following, the following dog and handler execute an overtake – in a 2 metre (or more) arc you overtake the

dog in front so the follower is now the followed. Do this for a few minutes. Swap backwards and forwards, reward any positive calm behaviour from both dogs.

This may be where you end your walk session.

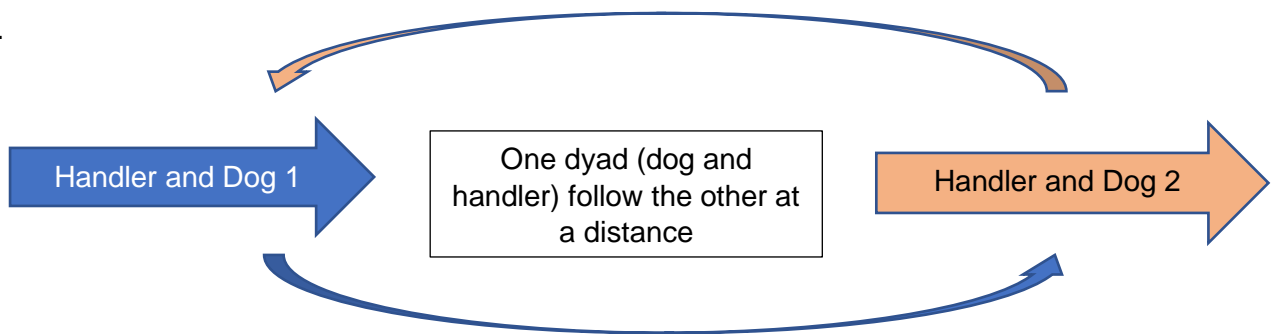


Figure 1: Diagrammatic Representation of the Follow Technique and Overtake

Parallel Walking

Next stage is the parallel walking

1. Handlers are 2m (or more) apart, the dogs are focused on the handlers – this is where loose lead walking practice helps this part of the behaviour pattern.
2. You are going to have the dogs on the outside of the handlers for 2 metres (or more) and walk around the park or area with the dogs focused and getting rewarded for calm behaviours.

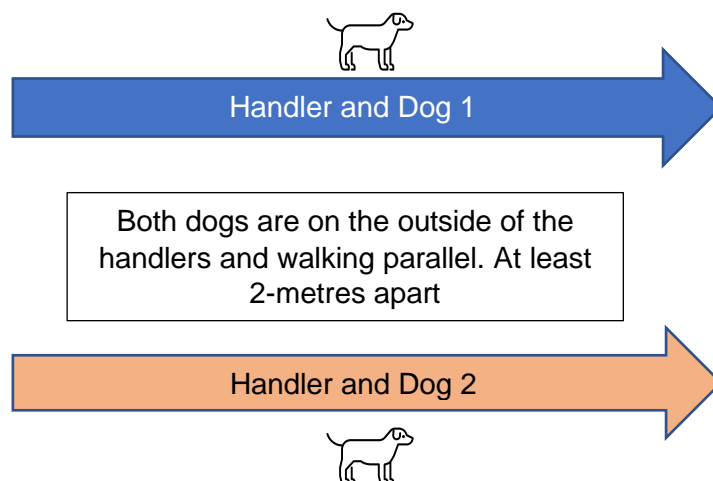


Figure 2: Diagrammatic Representation of Parallel Walking Set Up 1

- After about 10 minutes of this, then move one dog that is now 2 metres apart from the other handler. This means that going left to right it should be handler – dog – handler – dog

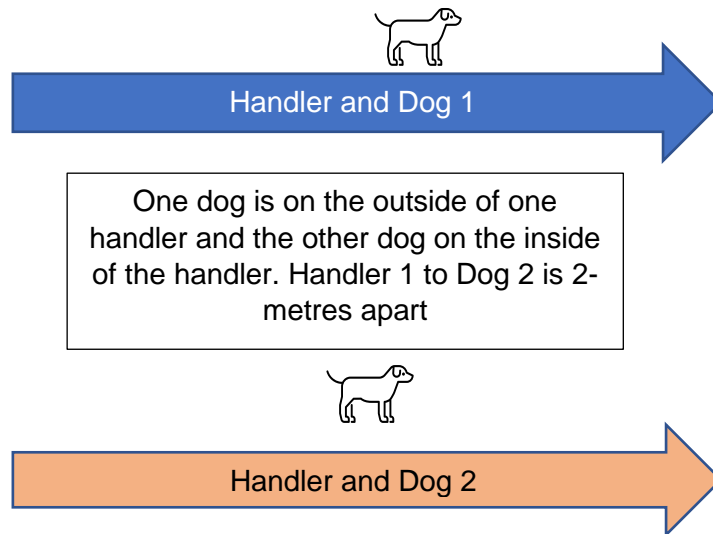
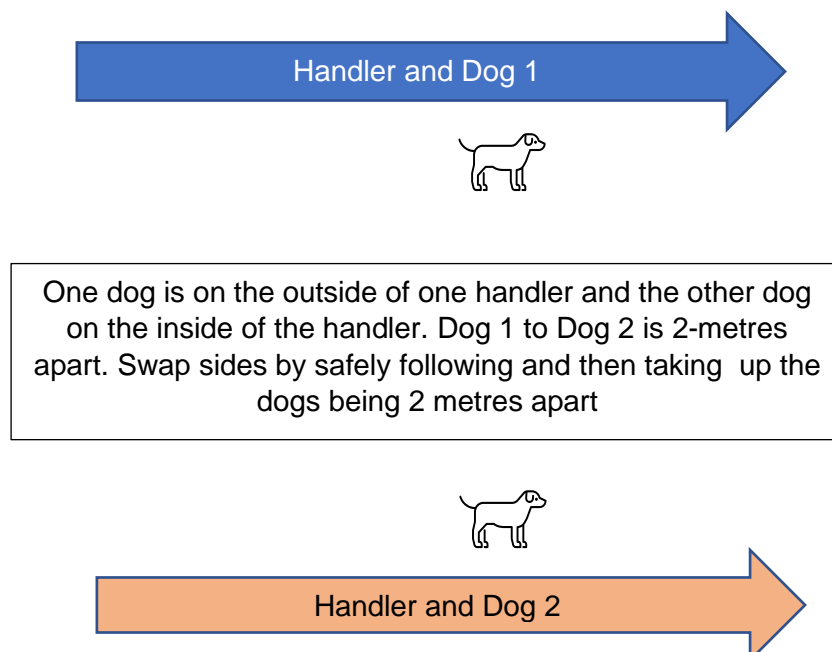


Figure 3: Diagrammatic Representation of the Parallel Walking Set Up 2

You may end it there. At the next session start with Step 2

Go through to Step 3

- Dogs are in the middle – so it is handler – dog – dog – handler
- Walk around like this, swap over the side that the dog is on so handler on the left becomes the handler on the right with the respective dog being on the alternate side.



This ensures that the dog's response is worked from both sides of the lead to a dog on both sides of the 'over-reactive' dog.

Practice this until the dogs are both comfortable within that 2-metre distance – if they need more distance you are going to be working down to a 1 metre distance.

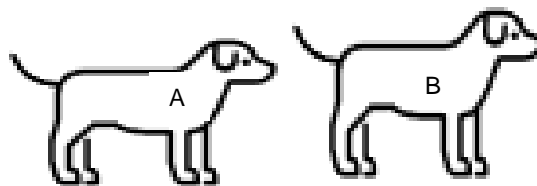
The Sniff and Go

Once you have achieved the 1 metre parallel walking it's now time to do the sniff and go.

In a study, dogs in a dog park in the USA, for the longest time being 11 seconds. When working with dogs I do the 3 second rule. Dogs can absorb quite a bit of information within 3 seconds when doing a butt sniff. Avoid face to face greetings and this can be done whilst walking (best way) as once static you get the build up of 'energy' and potential close encounter explosions.

So it's parallel walking 1 metre, the dog slips behind the other with the handler checking shoulder tension first, allow the dog to sniff the butt, then slow the sniffing dog down after 3 seconds and reward both dogs.

The sniffed dog, handler to keep shoulders relaxed, a good loose lead but sufficient to keep the dog moving forward whilst the dog that's sniffing can get a good sniff.



3 Second Sniff and Go

Figure 4: The Sniff and Go – Dog A is usually the overly reactive dog, the dog B is the calmer dog.

Please remember that if you are working with a particular dog all the time as your calm dog, that this does not necessarily transfer to all dogs. Dogs in these instances tend to be very poor at generalising behaviours. So, this concept although you may progress quicker through the stages with other dogs still needs to have attention to the steps in order for your dog to succeed.

Out on a walk you may find that your dog on learning how to be calm around other dogs may just want to get past them. Please do not MAKE YOUR DOG SAY HELLO! That undoes the trust that you have established and damages your human animal relationship bond.

Frustrated Greeters

Again, this is the lead adding to the 'reaction' of the dog. The dog is fine off lead, and once they get to say hello but acts like a whirling dervish when they see a dog. The training again, calm training, rewarding calm behaviours, distraction and foundation behaviours will help with these frustrated greeters. Giving a 'walk on' cue to a dog as they truly cannot say hello to every dog, and then giving a 'say hello' cue to the ones you have checked as friendly. Remember to practice in your garden or house with a lead on and when you are

going past a treat/toy etc you can say walk on and reward when they go past it. Your handling skills are much better to be practiced when you are not in the 'heat of the moment' with a stimulus.

Practice makes permanent.

The Barker

Oh my, this can be a headache when you have a dog that barks at any and every sound. There are reasons a dog will bark:

- To gain attention of the other dog or human
- To get the other dog or human to give more distance
- To communicate their feelings
- They find the action of barking to be highly rewarding
- The dog has been reinforced for barking by the human chatting to it and waiting for a reply back.

There are a few trains of thought for this, one is that barking is a habit and to ignore it, go back to the click and treat calm behaviours. This gives the message to the dog that their barking is no longer going to get any attention whatsoever.

You can put the bark on a cue 'speak' and then ask for a 'quiet' where you initially reward a quiet behaviour, click and treat (repeat a few hundred times), then put the cue in for quiet and it may have a physical cue such as your finger over your lips.

Barking is a way for dogs to communicate how they are feeling about the world or a given environment. Anouk and North are happy barkers (both Samoyeds) however my quiet word is 'enough'. When the doorbell goes there are 20 plus dogs that bark, I just say 'thank you' and then enough and they are generally quiet (North, Anouk and sometimes when Tiny stays – my son's dog – it's a little more prolonged). I reward the quiet by a scatter throw when working through training with the foster dogs.

If your dog barks at every passers-by – they are practicing the behaviour so for effective rehabilitation use the stick-on film at the windows this takes out the visual effects of those people, dogs, trucks passing by.

Work through the calming measures where you are training the dog that 'that right there is the state of mind/behaviour that I am looking for'... and the dog over time will get it.

I like my dogs to bark to alert me, I work on my own at home, sometimes when I'm out they do too, but then I action what it is I want them to do after the alerting. Outside it may be a recall, pop on lead, or a 'with me' or if it is someone I know then I say 'go say hello' as that is under cue. Again it becomes more of a vocal check-in as I may be 'off with the fairies' just ambling along enjoying the scenery as 'off the clock' with my own dogs.

There are certain breeds that are more prone to barking than others but by the process of clicking the calm gap, such as when they take a breath (after a highly reinforcing positive association with a clicker) you can achieve this 'gap' to be for longer, or to have a more appropriate time of barking.

When barking is around a stimulus – again it is about reducing the stimulus, so let's work through the doorbell scenario.

- Rustling outside the front door

- Doorbell or door knocker goes
- You move dog thinks – game on!
- You put the dog behind a door or you are grabbing/picking up the dog to stop them barking (tactile reinforcement here folks 😊)
- You answer the door, close the door
- Caller moves away and the dog has ‘scared’ off the intruder
- Handler tries to calm dog that may still be up on furniture barking as the stranger walks away.

It is a typical case that I’m called to help with – excessive barking

So, screen off the windows so the dog is not seeking a target in the initial phases.

I know that chair may be their favourite vantage point or the hall window may be too – just rearranging your furniture, a stair gate at the bottom of the stairs whilst doing rehabilitation work can help reduce the arousal and opportunities for ‘practicing this bad behaviour’, remember ‘practice makes permanent’ and this goes for good and poor behaviours. Equal opportunities for practicing.

Can the dog be left in a space that they don’t have access to the front door or the front window?

Desensitise and Counter-condition the doorbell or door knocker

Firstly, train the ‘Relax to Mat’ using the training plan

Secondly ask a friend or family member to ring the doorbell, ask dog for the trained mat behaviour

Continue this until the doorbell going or the door knocker going means that there is a reward coming on their mat.

With front doors (difficult to get to in my house as I have from the kitchen and living room a 4 ft gate, as well as the doors themselves) I avoid the dog being able to greet people at the door. Yes it sounds harsh, however the excitement behaviours will be ‘fixed’ around that door so then the excitement, added to the sound, added to the stranger leaving is already taking the dog over threshold (see above).

What do I do with my dogs?

My method is – door bell rings, I say ‘thank you’ for the initial bark, then I get up, the dogs are usually following me to the door at this point, if they bark again I say for ‘enough’ – if quiet, I use a marker word ‘good’. I will then say ‘let me through’ (I have a few dogs), I go through the door and stair gate, I close both (keeping visitor safe), I deal with the delivery person/neighbour/lost dog (I’m the local kennels apparently) and at this point there is the odd bark as they are waiting to see what is happening. If it’s family, I come through and let my dogs out the back so that the visitor can come in and get comfortable. If it’s a delivery person, I deal with them and the parcel/packet, then I come into the room, still let them out the back and give them a little scatter of treats.

My dogs learning is over time and could look like this:

- Door bell – we bark – action Mom – we wait quietly – action Mom comes back – scatter feed game as our reinforcement and reward.

- Doorbell – we bark – action Mom – we wait quietly – action Mom comes back, visitor behind stair gate – scatter feed as reinforcement – dogs asked back in gradually to say hello calmly, reinforced with more treats.

Treat and Rewards

You need to find what is rewarding for a dog. If your dog does not take treats, ditch the bowl and get the dog to perform their daily behaviours with their food allowance. If they like a toy that toy only comes out when reinforcing a new behaviour indicating that the toy is special. I have had handlers say but they are rewarding the dog every time – initially yes, however after reading 'Proofing a Behaviour' you may find that you go to a variable reinforcement schedule. At first I want to 'pay' the dog with a reward every time and any time that the dog displays the behaviour that I am after. Once they are doing the behaviour then you can sometimes drop it to a variable schedule of reinforcement. If the behaviour starts to dissipate up the reinforcement rate until you have it again, then start to move to a variable reinforcement rate again.

If you feel that you need specific help with your dog and it's over-reactive state it is worth getting an accredited and qualified dog behaviourist/trainer in to help you with your handling skills and understanding your dog's behaviour in a given environment and situation.

If you would like me to work with you to gain understanding and confidence in handling your dog then please get in touch on catherine.hallam@btinternet.com or 07813621947



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Metric Grid

Behaviour: What it looks like?				Repetitions? Sets of 5		
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Comments	Comments	Comments	Comments	Comments	Comments	Comments
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Comments	Comments	Comments	Comments	Comments	Comments	Comments

Under day 😊 for successful, 😞 or not successful day or a 'meh' face for getting there. Comments are for different environments/people/treats/handlers. Keeping a record enables you to see what may have contributed to both ends of the training scale.