

Behavior modification for dogs that are afraid of people or pets

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 help improve or resolve fear of people and other animals. Fear can be generalized to all people or all 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, small white dogs).

Treatment of fear

The plan involves repeatedly exposing the pet in a controlled manner to the type of person or animal that causes fear, and pairing that exposure with something the pet really likes. In time, the pet should actually look forward to and enjoy being with the person, although there may be some limits on how much you can expect your dog to tolerate. For example, not all dogs will be comfortable with physical contact (petting by people) or playing with other animals.

Desensitization is used in combination with counterconditioning to change the pet's attitude or "feeling" about people or animals 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. This can be done by beginning the sessions with the stimulus (person, other animal) sitting or staying far enough away so that the pet is not anxious. Counterconditioning is then used to change the dog's response to the stimulus by associating the dog's favored rewards (food, toys, play) with the stimulus. The dog is then gradually introduced to similar but progressively more intense stimuli paired together with the presentation of a favored reward. If an inappropriate response (fear, aggression, attempts at retreat) is exhibited, then the dog should be moved slightly farther away so it can calm, take the reward, and end the session with a positive outcome.

Response substitution is used to train the dog to display a new acceptable response (e.g., sit or lie down calmly) 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 to stimuli at a low enough intensity that fear is not evoked. Before training with fearful stimuli, begin a program of structured interactions where every time your dog seeks attention, you only give the attention for behaviors you want your dog to learn. Be consistent and predictable and your dog will quickly learn. For example, asking your dog to sit, lie down, or go to its bed (or waiting until it does one of these behaviors) before giving attention will teach your dog that these are the behaviors that get rewards. This is a win-win situation. Not only do you train the behaviors you want, but you give the dog control over its rewards, since it now can learn what behaviors are rewarded. Rule structure reduces a dog's anxiety and teaches desirable behaviors. Also use food, play, and treats in the same way to train the same behaviors in other situations. Once your dog is responsive to these commands when there is no fearful event, then training to overcome its fears can begin. A head halter and leash can be used to ensure success and high-value rewards used to mark and reinforce an acceptable relaxed response. You may also consider clicker training.

You will heighten the pet's fear or anxiety if you respond with a raised voice, agitation, or punishment. How the stimulus reacts also affects your dog's response; therefore, ensure exposures begin with stimuli that are well controlled, mild, and non-threatening. Avoid all further fear-evoking stimuli until you are ready for successful exposure. The goal is to reward only desirable responses. Therefore, it is critical that rewards are not given until your dog is calm, settled, and displaying the behavior you want it to learn.

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

1. Know the signs of fear; identify all stimuli and situations that cause fear (e.g., children playing, tall men).
2. Prevent your dog from experiencing the stimuli except during conditioning 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 on cue in the absence of any fear-evoking stimuli. Work on the cues you plan to use when you begin exposure. Outdoors, you might focus on walking with a short amount of slack leash ("heel"), sit and focus and turn and walk in the other direction ("walk away"). Indoors, "sit" and "focus," "down" and "settle" or crate and mat exercises might be most useful. A head halter can be used to ensure success.
5. Once the dog will reliably focus, settle, and accept rewards in a variety of environments, then training can progress to include exposure to controlled levels of the stimulus.

6. Set the pet up to succeed. A familiar dog or person can be used as the initial training stimulus to ensure that your dog will relax and take rewards as soon as it sees the stimulus (e.g., dogs on the street, visitors at the door).
7. For both counterconditioning and response substitution, the dog's favored rewards should be used. Save the rewards of highest value for training sessions and exposure to the stimuli.
8. You will need to develop a gradient for introduction to the fear-evoking stimulus so that initial exposures are mild. Setting up sessions with good stimulus control can be difficult and take some forethought but is essential for successful counterconditioning and response substitution.
 - (a) First, list all stimuli that might incite fear or anxiety. Stimuli may be sights, sounds, smell, or touch. There may be multiple stimuli that need to be improved. For example, a dog that is fearful of children on bicycles may need to be desensitized to bicycles, children, and bicycle motion separately.
 - (b) Once each stimulus is identified, a means of controlling the stimuli along a gradient of increasingly greater intensity must be developed. A gradient can be designed using distance from the stimulus (far to near), similarity (e.g., beginning with least similar to what causes fear and moving to more similar), activity level (low to high), noise level, location (from calmest to most problematic), and familiarity (train to family members before strangers). If the dog is calmer or more responsive to a trainer or particular family member, that person should work with the dog first.
 - (c) Advance along the gradients very slowly. If you proceed through a step too quickly and the pet responds fearfully, relax, and allow the pet to settle. By using a leash and head halter, it is often possible to calm the dog with a gentle pull to get eye contact and release when calm. Otherwise move back to a distance where the pet calms. Once the fear response has ceased, give the valued reward. At first the animal or person should avoid eye contact and walk back and forth at a distance that does not cause fear.
 - (d) The favored reward is paired with success and calmness at each new step. Ideally give the reward as soon as the dog looks at the target (LAT). If the dog shows no aggression and looks away, or looks at you, removing the dog can also serve as a valuable reward (in addition to the food reward). Always end each session on a positive note.

Example

A dog might be most fearful of young boys at a distance of 15 meters (50 feet) or less while playing in front of the house. Four gradients could be used: distance, appearance, location, and actions. For distance, exposures would start at 20 meters (65 feet) (i.e., beyond that which would evoke the fear response) and move progressively forward a few meters at each session as long as the dog takes the rewards and shows no fear. The appearance gradient might start with exposure to adults or teenagers before younger boys. The activity gradient might begin with two people standing quietly and progress gradually to more intense play, and a location gradient might begin with off-property training such as boys playing at a distance in a park. If the fear was toward boys on bicycles or roller blades, then desensitization and counterconditioning with the bicycle or roller blades would also be necessary. One method might be to use a family member for training the dog to make positive association with bike riding, before counterconditioning to children standing with the bike and then riding the bike.

Fear/anxiety toward other animals

The approach is similar to that outlined above.

For aggression toward other animals, stimuli that might cause anxiety are visual: physical characteristics (e.g., species, breed, color, size, age), postures, facial expressions and actions, odors, and sounds (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. Always know and accept your dog's limits.

Be confident, calm, and make sure your dog is responsive to commands and motivated for the rewards to ensure successful outcomes. A leash and head halter will provide more control if safety is an issue.