

INFLUENCING BEHAVIOUR

You influence your dog's behaviour in many ways! Your body position, how you hold the lead, what sounds you make, which way you walk and how you move your body can all have an effect on how your dog behaves.

Your dog can see you, hear you, smell you, feel your touch and sense your movement far better than we are able to. So when you need to get your dog's attention, think about how you can do so other than calling their name or pulling on the lead.

Also be aware of how you might be accidentally influencing your dog's behaviour.

Are you inadvertently leading them towards something they are concerned about? Are you holding the lead tight while they are just standing there? Is your body blocking them from moving away from something scary?

Understanding your dog is key to resolving reactivity, but it's just as important to see how your own body language and behaviour can influence things too.



CHANGING ASSOCIATIONS

Imagine you work in an office and you are nervous of your boss. You hear them coming down the corridor and you feel yourself getting stressed. You stare intently at the screen, hoping if you avoid eye contact, they won't come over.

Your boss walks over, places cash on your desk for you and leaves. You look at the cash and think that encounter wasn't so bad.

The next day you are reading a manual and hear your boss approaching. Your boss walks by and again places cash on your desk for you and leaves. You look at the cash and think your boss walking by might be a pretty good thing.

The third day while talking on the phone, you hear your boss coming towards your desk. You stop talking and look up at the boss as they put cash on your desk for you. How might you feel about your boss?

If your boss brings good things every time they pass regardless of what you are doing, you will start to look forward to them appearing. You may even get up to greet them. Your feelings have changed and so has your behaviour.

Instead of having a negative association, you are starting to build a positive one.



We can use exactly the same process with our dogs to help them shift from feeling fearful or nervous when they see triggers to feeling happy or even optimistic.

To do this we can use the Open Bar/Closed Bar method. When your dog notices a trigger, feed them high value treats. Keep feeding as long as the trigger is visible and stop as soon as it goes away.

The order here is very important. The food must appear after your dog is aware of the trigger and not before. This means that the trigger will predict tasty things appearing and not the other way around! If you get the order wrong, your dog may learn that treats predict scary things happening, which can cause an aversion to treats!

You are not looking for any particular behaviour from your dog. You are going to feed them regardless of what they are doing, even if they're reacting. This may seem counterintuitive but remember you are focusing on building new associations.

Don't worry about reinforcing their reactivity. Just as changing how you felt about your boss, changed your behaviour, changing how your dog feels will see them offer new behaviours too.

So make sure triggers are always followed by good things appearing and you will be well on your way to changing how your dog feels and behaves!



GETTING YOUR DOG'S ATTENTION TO MOVE AWAY

When you're out on a walk, and your dog has become fixated on something you'll want to get their attention so that you can move away before they overreact.

One option is to combine a hand over hand movement, known as Stroking the Lead, while you get into your dog's peripheral vision. Usually this will help them disengage. If your dog is struggling, try adding an additional prompt such as making a kissing sound or shuffling your feet. Once your dog disengages from the trigger, praise and move away to a comfortable distance where your dog can relax.

This lead technique provides a way for you to support your dog in moving away from a trigger without the need to pull on the lead.

Empower your dog to make better choices as you work together on their reactivity.



PROMPTING WITH NOISE

Your dog's hearing is incredibly sensitive compared to yours. They can hear higher frequencies and detect sounds coming from much farther away.

When your dog is focused on something and you want them to disengage, try making small noises such as clearing your throat, coughing, softly speaking a few words or making an unusual noise like a click or kissy sound.

You can also make sound with your feet. Drag your foot on the ground to create a noise and give the sense of some movement from you without actually moving.

Try whispering rather than shouting "this way"... Remember your dog can hear it just as easily! And you don't always need to include your dog's name - keep that for when you really need it so it doesn't just become "noise" to your dog.

Your dog will be aware of the subtle differences in your tone of voice, so try not to sound panicked and remain calm so you help them feel safe and let them know they are making good choices.

So the next time your dog is engrossed in something and you need their attention, take advantage of their phenomenal hearing to prompt them to move on.



PROMPTING WITH YOUR BODY

Your dog is very aware of where you are in relation to them. They can see, hear, smell and feel how close you are, where you are located and how you are moving.

When your dog is aware of another dog or human they are concerned about, your movement reminds your dog that you are there and can make them feel safer.

You can also use your body position to influence your dog's behaviour for the better!

Opening up space for your dog to move away can really support them. Take a step in any direction as long as it's not towards the scary thing, as this will often prompt your dog to move with you.

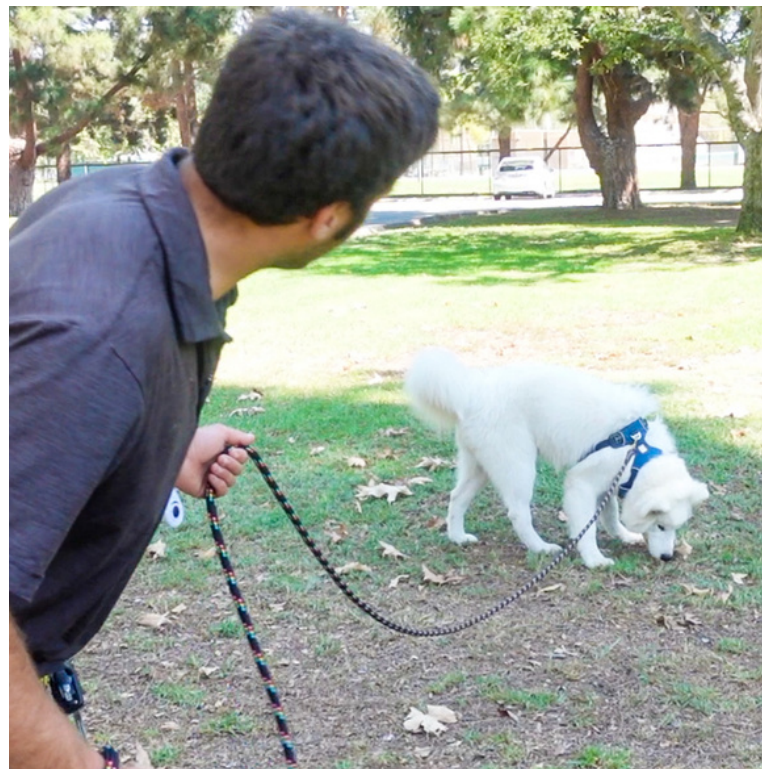
Leading your dog towards something they are unsure about may add to their concern. Even if you know it's safe, giving your dog the choice of whether or not to get closer will help to ensure the best outcome.

Your dog can sense you making smooth and easy moves with your body even if you don't take any steps. Try shifting your weight, rolling your shoulders, twisting your torso or bending your knees and see how your dog responds.

Looking softly at your dog, nodding your head or smiling will show them you are engaged with them. Sometimes, just taking a deep, relaxed breath will cause your dog to do the same.

Your dog has a much wider field of vision than we do. They can see 240 degrees around them so they can see you when you are in line with their shoulder. Getting in their face isn't necessary, all you need to do is move into their peripheral vision.

We often think of our voice as the main tool to get our dog's attention, but remember our body speaks just as loudly.



PROMPTING WITH YOUR LEAD

The lead is a highly sensitive and powerful line of communication between you and your dog. It communicates when to keep going, when to stop and in which direction to move.

It doesn't take much for a dog to receive a message from you through the lead. In fact pulling or tugging can actually cue your dog to react! So let's look at how you can use the lead to prompt your dog to make better choices.

Your dog can feel the lead and even the clip. They can hear and feel whether it is connected to their collar or harness. Moving the lead slightly in any direction will shift the clip position and give your dog a subtle signal.

Moving your hands from up high near your chest, to low near your hips will change the weight distribution of the lead. Your dog will feel this shift which may be enough to prompt your dog to move.

This is like tapping them on the shoulder instead of pulling at their shirt. These subtle movements are often all your dog needs to prompt them to move.



ACE SET-UPS

ACE Free Work is an ideal context to help your dog become more comfortable around things that concern them, including objects, other dogs or people.

Make sure that your dog is familiar with Free Work. Teach them the Counting Game so you can invite engagement with you. If you are doing a set-up with another dog or a person, use a sliding line for safety.

Start by placing a reduced version of what they are concerned about in the Free Work. This could be a blanket with the scent of another dog, a stuffie or an article of human clothing. Reducing triggers to less intense versions allows you to introduce things more slowly. You can also introduce them to a harness, umbrella or muzzle in this way.

Watch your dog and see how they respond. You may see excessive interest, avoidance or your dog may not be bothered at all. If you see any signs of concern, remove the object or place it further away.



When your dog is comfortable you can begin to increase the intensity. This may mean moving the object or introducing a dog or person at a distance. If you are working with a helper dog, give them their own Free Work area so they have something to explore and investigate as well. This will prevent them staring at your dog, which could be alarming for dogs who struggle around others. It also prevents them from becoming worried by your dog.

Work with your dog at a suitable distance and allow them to explore at their own pace. Only stop them if they are getting too close or moving too quickly towards the other dog. You can use the Counting Game or stroke the line to encourage them to move away.

Working like this within Free Work allows your dog to experience their triggers safely and with choice in a familiar environment that they already enjoy. You may be surprised by how much progress you make.



THE DREADED DOORBELL

The doorbell can be one of the most challenging sounds for many dogs. If your dog overreacts to the sound of a doorbell you will want to help them change how they feel about it.

To start, disconnect the doorbell, or cover it up so visitors can't press it and get people to ring you when they arrive instead of knocking on the door. Putting a sign on the door will really help prevent mishaps. This will give you instant relief and a chance to build a new association at your dog's pace

Consider changing the sound your doorbell makes. You can get a brand new doorbell, or select a different tone if your doorbell has this feature. This will help you build a positive association from scratch, without having to overcome negative experiences with the original sound.

Record the sound of your doorbell. You can then play this back at a low volume and give your dog something they enjoy each time. This can be playing with you after they hear the sound, tossing a treat for them to get, or scattering treats for them to find. Gradually increase the volume over several sessions before using the actual doorbell. In time your dog will start to anticipate good things every time they hear these sounds.



Teach your dog that the sound of the doorbell is a cue to do something. This could be going to their mat or other specific location. It could also be to come and find you. Teach the behaviour first on a separate cue without the doorbell. You can then add the doorbell as a new cue by making the sound immediately before cueing the behaviour. Over several repetitions your dog will start to understand that the doorbell means to do that behaviour. Make sure you reward generously every time they get it right!

Practice playing the doorbell randomly throughout the day and reward your dog every time they offer the new behaviour. If they struggle with this you'll want to make it easier for your dog by practicing more at the earlier stages.

Now you can enlist friends, family or neighbors to help you practice with the doorbell in place.

Repeat these steps for knocking as well and in time you may be able to remove any remaining management.

Putting the time into mastering these steps can make a huge difference to life at home with your dog.



REDUCING TENSION BY STROKING THE LEAD

Tension in the lead can trigger your dog to react. A simple way to reduce this tension is by using a technique called stroking the lead.

Hold the end of the lead in one hand. With your other hand reach along the lead an arm's length and, with the lead between your thumb and fingers, slide your hand back along the lead towards you. Repeat this with the other hand, and then again with the original hand, over and over, in a smooth action.

Keep your hands as soft as possible and move your hips and your feet. This will keep tension out of your body.

Practise the action while your dog is standing still to begin with. This is particularly important if your dog is pulling. Move on the spot and stroke the lead until they stop pulling forward and can stand with no pressure on the lead. Then take a step forward as you continue to stroke the lead.

As well as reducing tension in the lead, lead stroking helps you signal to your dog to change direction and can encourage your dog to move on if they become stuck. It's a very versatile technique that can really support you and your dog as you work through their reactivity together.



REDUCING LEAD TENSION WITH SLIDING LINES

Tension in the lead is often a trigger for over reactivity. You can reduce this using a sliding connection to your dog's harness or collar, rather than a fixed one. There are three ways to do this.

First you can use a Freedom Handle. This is a soft handle attached to a large metal ring that is used in conjunction with a double-ended lead and harness. Connect your lead to the back of the harness before passing it through the ring on the handle and attaching the other end to the front of the harness or collar. The handle will slide along the lead helping to reduce lead tension as you walk.

The Freedom Handle is particularly useful if you tense up when you see a trigger. Your dog will feel this with a normal lead, which can result in a reaction, but with a Freedom Handle they won't notice.



Second, you can use a TTouch Connector. This is a piece of webbing that connects to the front and back of the harness. It has a sliding ring to attach to which makes it suitable for use with single clip leads and longer lines.

Third, you can use a soft rope. This should be at least 15 foot long. Pass one end through the ring on the back of your dog's harness before tying both ends together to form a continuous loop. This is important so that you can't accidentally drop one end of the rope and lose your dog!

Hold the rope in both hands, a hip distance apart, and allow the line to slide through the ring on the back of the harness as your dog moves.

An added benefit for sound sensitive dogs is that there are no noises from a metal clip.

Practice with these at home until you get used to how they feel. Then you can venture out with your dog for a tension-free walk!



TTOUCH BALANCE LEAD

When your dog reacts, it is natural to hold onto them tighter. You might pull them in, make the lead short or hold their collar so that you feel in control. But the risk with all of these is that they are likely to increase your dog's reactivity.

The TTouch Balance Lead will help you contain your dog when you need to without triggering frustration or panic. It provides safe limits in which your dog can move and watch, but reduces the likelihood of arousal increasing.

The Balance Lead uses any soft, flat lead that is at least 6-feet long. Hold the lead about a foot from the point of contact to the collar or harness with one hand and the lead handle in the other. Let the lead between your hands hang in a big "smile". Lower this over your dog's opposite shoulder and bring the loop around their chest. Bring your hands together behind your dog's shoulders and hold both parts of the lead in one hand.

What you end up with is the lead forming a loose loop over your dog's chest and shoulders.

Your dog can continue to move within the loop of the Balance Lead so they are not tightly restrained but they can't lunge or pull forward. You can hold a very strong dog using this technique.

Use it in situations where you want to keep your dog as calm as possible and remain in control where you can't create the space you think your dog needs. It is also useful when you want to give your dog a chance to process and self-calm without risking them becoming more aroused through tension in the lead.

Think of it as a safety net but remember it is not a replacement for giving your dog appropriate space and training.



REACTIVITY TO VISITORS USING FOOD

When it comes to working with reactivity around visitors, you'll want to combine management with positive training.

Make sure you know when your visitors are coming and have plenty of high value treats ready that your dog really loves. Prepare your visitors with clear instructions on how to behave around your dog. This could include avoiding eye contact, not approaching or touching your dog, sitting calmly and notifying you if they need to move so that you can support your dog.

When your visitors arrive you may find it helpful to meet them somewhere neutral outside with your dog before coming back together. This is great if your dog is only reactive to people inside the home.

If they come directly into the house make sure your dog is safely in another room while you welcome your visitors and settle them in.



Bring your dog in on a lead initially or put them behind a gate or barrier where they can see the people but not get to them.

As soon as your dog notices the visitor, give them a treat. You want to deliver the treat as soon as your dog is aware of the person and not before. This is because you want the visitor's presence to mean good things happen!

If your dog doesn't show interest in the treats, this could be a sign the situation is too much for them. Try to create more space and if this doesn't work take them out to settle elsewhere and try again another day.

Notice any patterns if your dog is struggling. Is it specific visitors, or particular types of people such as men or children? If you notice a pattern you will need to do more work around these visitors.

Taking these steps whenever someone visits may help your dog form new associations to people in the home.

