

Scaredy Dogs

Dealing with fear and the agility dog

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Possible Contributing Factors

Genetics vs. Environment

Meet the parents and other relatives in varied situations

"Kennel dog syndrome"

Under-socialized puppy

Not obvious in familiar territory

Critical periods of Development

Fear stages to be aware of:

8 to 11 weeks

5 or 6 months to maturity

Avoid situations

Be prepared to handle positively

Recognizing fear

Body Posture:

Subtle to blatant

Body signs to look for

Ears back, lips drawn back, lip licking, panting, eyes dilated, and eyes large and showing whites, tail down, tense body, shaking, avoidance

Defensive aggression

Barking, lunging, growling, snapping, biting

Fear and Aggression:

Defensive aggression can be self-rewarding

1 rep of someone backing away = relief which can create learned aggression

Dog's perception – passersby the aggressing is working

Relief is self rewarding for the dog

Displacement behaviors:

Stress or fear: Yawning, sniffing, scratching, zoomies, appearing distracted

Environmental Situations:

Dogs attach fears to things/people/situations

Scary event + sight of person in hat = person in hat now scary (not the event)

Preventing fear from building:

Take it SLOW when training something potentially scary

SHAPE don't LURE

See Saw example

Easier to take your time in the beginning than fix later

Always work within the dog's comfort zone

Always handle the emotional reactions of dogs in a positive manner

Never force into a situation that can be avoided

Less potential for fallout

Flooding and Punishment have potential for suppression and fallout

Decreasing the Fear

A safe approach to change emotions

Classical conditioning to reduce the emotional response

Then work towards teaching an alternative behavior using operant conditioning through positive reinforcement techniques and shaping ideally with a clicker

What is Classical Conditioning?

Classical works on the emotions

Associates one event with another

Changes emotions and behavior based on the emotions

Fear (emotion) = fight or flight (behavior)

Classical works for us and against us

Against = Loud noise happens as a dog sees a person and then associates the noise with that person

For = Counter conditioning, use of a strong positive (food) in association with the person the dog is now afraid of to reduce fear

Decreasing the Fear - CC Guidelines

Situate the dog for minimal reaction to the trigger stimulus

This may require distance, barriers, lower level of sound, slow progress

The dog needs to perceive the stimulus or trigger first

THEN follow with really good food (it just appears)

Drop on the ground if not taking from your hand – (appetitive behavior and is self rewarding)

Increase distance from the trigger if not eating at all

Dog begins to focus on you - add an alternative behavior

You are now moving from classical conditioning to operant conditioning

First alternative behavior often needs to be simply to focus on the handler

Operant conditioning teaches behaviors – replace the old fear reaction with a new behavior once the emotional response is reduced

Positive reinforcement only

- Luring - avoid with fear issues

- Shape behaviors you want

- Shaping engages the brain

Use already known & fun (to the dog) behaviors after getting attention first

Go back to CC anytime the reactivity increases

Slowly decrease the distance OR increase the stimulus

Set up and manage the environment carefully for best results

Take note - Poisoned Cues

Some verbal cues can be poisoned due to bad experiences

Obstacle names after a bad experience

The repair review:

Be patient – small steps

Work for short periods of time In class – have dogs go out for a break

Continually observe your dog's posture to know how he is doing

Classical first (counter-condition)

Use high value reinforcement

Work at a distance/pace the dog can handle

Move from classical to operant when the fear is reduced

Reactions are less

Dog can focus on you

Back to classical if dog reacts again

ALWAYS create an escape. Let the dog take more distance if needed

Obstacles – allow getting off. Ask to get off before they need to get off and progress is even quicker

NEVER force a fearful dog