

Dealing with Fear of an Obstacle

TEETERING on the Edge

By Leslie McDevitt, Photos by Ardis Lukens

Background

Quinn is a handsome blue merle Border Collie. When he was a young pup he took an agility puppy class where all the puppies practiced banging the teeter. The more classes he attended, the more sensitive he became to the loud noise and rambunctious play of other puppies flying down their new favorite obstacle. I happened to be taking this class with my own puppy, so I witnessed the beginning of Quinn's teeter problem firsthand.

With every bang, Quinn had a small, but noticeable response. His expressive blue eyes had a, "What the heck is going on" look, and he backed up a little bit, away from the source of the noise. I was concerned that he was becoming sensitized to the teeter. Meanwhile, Quinn's owner, Liz, felt pressure to bring Quinn up to the level of his classmates. The instructor suggested Quinn play near the teeter more, which only served to increase his fear as he heard the banging more and more often.

Pushing the Dog Over the Edge

As Quinn matured and continued agility classes, the teeter remained his nemesis. Liz received some suggestions on how to treat Quinn's teeter phobia. They were all well-intentioned, but none of them convinced Quinn that the teeter was his friend. In fact, these efforts increased rather than alleviated the problem.

Suggestion #1

Play with Quinn near the teeter while other dogs are smacking it down.

This is a popular way to treat teeter fears, and for a less sensitive dog than Quinn, it might have worked. However, each dog needs to be taken into account as an individual; Quinn was not only anxious about teeter noise, but he was also on his way to developing what was later diagnosed as clinical noise phobia. The phobia originally manifested at home when he hid upstairs in a panic whenever Liz went into the kitchen. He hid because he was terrified of the sound of pots and pans being moved about.

There are three major reasons that attempts to “make” Quinn play with a toy near the teeter did not work.

1. Bigger Picture: There was a much bigger picture to consider here than Quinn’s instructors simply observing him in class and from that alone saying that tugging when the noise occurred would teach him to like the noise. There was genetic predisposition, Quinn’s age (a common age for sensitivities and “quirks” to escalate), and Quinn’s history of being exposed beyond his threshold to the teeter’s noise at a young age.

2. Pressure: There was too much pressure being put on Quinn to interact with the teeter. The teeter was being made into a “big deal.”


3. Misapplication of Learning Theory: Since Quinn was a very high-drive dog that in almost any context (besides being around a teeter) would turn himself inside out to tug or play ball or Frisbee, everybody remained convinced that his love of toys would trump his teeter fears. Actually the opposite started to happen.

By the time I worked with Quinn, the sight of a Frisbee in the same yard as the teeter was a signal that he was going to have to interact with the teeter. Therefore, he lost interest in playing with the Frisbee. The connection, Frisbee = teeter, had successfully been made, and it had backfired. Anything that equaled teeter was the enemy. Quinn was losing motivation to play with his favorite toy!


This is a phenomenon that often happens when people attempt to countercondition a dog without simultaneously desensitizing him. Counterconditioning and desensitizing are learning theories that must be thoroughly understood before applying them. Counterconditioning is meant to change the dog’s feelings about a stimulus he finds distressing by pairing that stimulus with something he enjoys. (Every time you see the UPS man, you get a pig’s ear!) Desensitization is a gradual process by which the dog is exposed, subthreshold (below the point at which he will have an adverse reaction), to the stimulus he finds distressing.

When you work above an individual dog’s threshold, you are “flooding” the dog. Depending on a dog’s temperament and the circumstances, flooding a dog can work. But in my opinion there is too much potential for fallout from this technique; and it is stressful on the dog, so I choose not to use it.

Quinn was accidentally being flooded during the process of teaching him that Frisbee or tug equals teeter. That’s why it backfired. He was still kept close enough to the teeter that he was having a reaction to the sound and was being exposed above his threshold. As long as he was reacting, he was not in the optimal state to learn what people wanted him to learn. Anxious dogs do not learn well.

 **Suggestion #2**
Put your hand on Quinn’s collar, make him go up and down the teeter, and play with him at the end. If he tries to jump off, gently keep him on the teeter and make him keep going so that he learns he can’t jump off—he has to do the teeter.

This is a popular form of flooding that I do not like to see happen to dogs that have obstacle fears. It certainly was not helping Quinn to “get over it” or “get used to it.” Rather, it was reinforcing his belief that the teeter was the worst thing ever to happen to him. Not only that, he was learning not to trust his handler when a teeter was in the picture.

 **Suggestion #3**
Go back to teeter foundation work, such as playing on the wobble board and putting the teeter on the floor. Shape the dog to smack the bottom of it and make it fun.

This is a great suggestion, but it didn’t work for Quinn. He was totally fearless on the wobble board ever since he was a puppy. I remember him in classes, jumping up and down on the wobble board and tugging with all his might, while thinking he was hot stuff. Quinn’s feelings about the wobble board had not changed. He still associated it with fun and tugging. He also had no problem with the teeter when it was collapsed flat on the ground.

It was the noise and the visual picture of other dogs on the teeter (predictors of the noise) that had started the trouble. Exacerbating this was the pressure he had been under consistently to play near it, and on it, and be walked up and down it by people holding his collar. That pressure was turning the teeter experience into an ordeal to survive rather than a fun game to play.

In addition, some well-meaning helpers felt Liz created the problem by showing her anxiety, a gross oversimplification when you step back and examine the various pieces of Quinn’s teeter puzzle. Being human, Liz did start feeling some anxiety about Quinn’s teeter training. After she saw there was a problem she tried various suggestions that didn’t fix the problem. But she didn’t cause the problem.

Stepping Back From the Edge

Quinn was a little over a year old at the time I worked with him. Taking Quinn’s history and personality into account, Liz and I were able to formulate a plan to help him embrace, rather than fear, the teeter. Since Quinn reacted to the sound, not the movement, we needed to separate that startling banging sound from the rest of the teeter picture. We started the teeter at a low height, hoping to decrease the sound and fury, though ultimately the height was not a concern. We also worked with an outdoor teeter, which made a much softer sound than the one in the noisy training facility. With a padding of blankets and pillows, the teeter made no thudding sound at all. But the teeter still creaked when pressure was put on its pivot joints, so we held the middle of the teeter and controlled the plank’s descent to keep it as quiet as possible.

Everyone had focused on the sound, which was in fact the problem, but by doing so had connected the rest of the teeter experience to the sound. We surmised that once Quinn figured out he could operate the teeter without any sound, he would then go back to his “normal” self and be enthusiastic about learning and playing. If necessary, we could record an unmuffled teeter sound and go back to the noise issue later, once Quinn had learned to love the silent teeter.

Before bringing Quinn near the teeter I had my Border Collie, Easy, run up and down it. Quinn noticed immediately that it had no sound and I could see him make a huge mental note of that.

When Liz and I stood near the teeter, Quinn would run to a certain spot at the other end of my backyard where he could hide behind a tunnel. I let him do that while he watched Easy play on the teeter. He was intrigued and came out of hiding to watch. He was starting to relax because he wasn’t anticipating the sound. There was no sound! Also, seeing a dog on the teeter did not signal the end of the world, as it had before. Again, sound could be added back to the scenario later.



Before coming to my yard, Quinn had gotten to a point in his teeter training where he would tentatively offer touching the bottom of the teeter with his front paws, but he would panic if he felt any pressure to go any higher on the board. Liz had been guiding him up the rest of the way using his collar. Because he would already touch the bottom of the teeter, I did not have to shape him to do so, which saved tons of time.

I warned Liz ahead of time that I was going to allow Quinn to come off the teeter without doing the entire obstacle. She was very concerned that I would be teaching him that he could jump off the teeter whenever he wanted. I explained that we needed to just work on teaching Quinn it was safe to interact even a tiny bit with the teeter. There could be no pressure from humans trying to keep him on the obstacle against his wishes. I also explained that release from the pressure of being on the teeter was a tremendous reward we needed to use. This approach seemed very counterintuitive to Liz, but she decided to give it a try.

The instant Quinn put his paws on the bottom of the teeter plank, I clicked and threw his Frisbee. He would catch it and run back to his safe spot on the other side of my yard, behind the tunnel. My instinct told me to run over to that spot and play Frisbee with him there. Access to his safe zone was part of the reinforcement process. The Frisbee, which is what everybody had been concentrating on as the primary reinforcer, was the least potent part of the reinforcement process for Quinn. In fact, my entire teeter plan for Quinn hinged on my feeling that a cue to get off the teeter was the most potent possible reinforcer. Once he learned to enjoy being on the teeter without anxiety, his natural enthusiasm and work ethic would shine through and it would be much easier to desensitize him to the sound component.

To recap, the reinforcers at work here were:

- ▶ Getting to run away from the teeter
- ▶ Getting to play in the safe zone (no pressure from only being allowed to play next to the teeter)
- ▶ The Frisbee

Making the Teeter Reinforcing

Because so much pressure was taken off Quinn—he was not being physically forced to stay on the teeter, he could control how high he went up on it, he could choose to leave, he could return to his safe zone at will—he very quickly started offering a new behavior. Quinn was going a little bit higher up on the teeter plank before jumping off. Although letting him feel empowered was very important, I wanted to *cue* him to jump off rather than wait for him to jump off. So I read Quinn very carefully and asked him to jump off just before it looked like he was getting ready to jump off on his own. I did this so that I could take full advantage of my favorite dog training principle—the Premack Principle.

The Premack Principle tells us that you can reinforce a low-probability behavior (going up the teeter) with access to a high-probability behavior (jumping off the teeter). This takes the conflict out of training and is a very powerful way to change a dog's mind about giving us the low-probability behavior. The hierarchy of motivations starts to shift and the dog begins to get excited about performing the low-probability behavior, while it becomes a predictor of getting to do the high-probability behavior. In Quinn's case, this meant, "Touch the teeter so you can run away from it and play Frisbee in your safe zone."



Could the Problem Have Been Avoided?

Quinn needed a customized teeter protocol. In the meantime he should not have been exposed to other puppies in the training facility smacking down the teeter, because every time he heard it, his nervous system got tweaked and his fear heightened.

It can be hard for instructors to provide sensitive dogs with the opportunities they need to succeed in a group class. Here are some things that might have helped Quinn avoid developing teeter fears:

- ▶ Take him out of the classroom during teeter training so that he was not exposed to the noise repeatedly when it was over his threshold.
- ▶ Give him a break from teeter training and work on foundation behaviors that are fun, without the mental pressure that "you have to learn the teeter now." Don't let a problem make you think that you need to rush to a solution; complete other goals that will build self-confidence before addressing obstacles that your puppy does not feel comfortable approaching.
- ▶ Understand that there is no universal way to teach obstacles. Some instructors subscribe to the notion, "This is when puppies learn the teeter, and this is how they learn it, so you have to do it exactly the same." Allow your puppy to learn in his own time and way.

So, every time Quinn took a couple steps up the teeter, I called him off the obstacle and ran with him to the safe zone where we played Frisbee. Then I released him to go do his own thing, put the Frisbee in my pocket, and returned to the teeter. I did not ask Quinn to accompany me, but every time he *chose* to follow me back to the teeter and touch it. Each time I waited for him to go a little bit farther up the plank before I called him off. This was a very careful balance of raising criteria and getting the timing right so that I could release him from the teeter *before* he jumped off.

This process didn't take long at all, and suddenly Quinn was offering running up and down the teeter. We made it higher; that did not matter in the least. Then I stopped holding the pivot joint. The creaking bothered him slightly and we could watch the thought process as Quinn decided not to care about it.

At that point I decided to experiment. I called Quinn off the teeter and ran to his safe zone with him to play. This time when I put the Frisbee in my pocket and released him to go about his business, I stayed in the safe zone, ignoring him rather than going back to the teeter. I wondered if Quinn would take any steps toward the teeter without me. Liz's jaw dropped as Quinn ran full speed across my yard, ran up the teeter, stopped just before the tip point, and turned his head backward like an owl to make sure that I was watching. I praised him and ran up to the teeter while he waited for me. When I got there he finished the teeter and then I played Frisbee with him near the teeter rather than running with him back to his safe zone.

Taking the pressure off, knowing how to reward the dog, where to reward him, and what to reward him with, were all Quinn needed to jump-start his teeter rehab.

It turned out that Quinn was so pleased with his newfound friend, the teeter, that Liz did not feel the need to make a recording of the noise. He was not worrying about the thud the teeter was making in her backyard when she removed the pillows after two days of short training sessions. He was also using the teeter at the agility club during private lessons, which was the same teeter he'd panicked about before.

The Last Piece of the Puzzle

There is one final piece that needs to be added to the teeter puzzle: Quinn still needs to be desensitized to the sound of other dogs smacking the teeter in group classes. This will be Liz's next project, so that Quinn can attend group agility classes without feeling distressed when the teeter is being used.

The various elements of Quinn's story remind us that we need to remember to step back from a problem and see the bigger picture for each dog. We need to read each dog and become familiar with his history and personality so that we can know how to meet his needs as an individual rather than falling back on a one-size-fits-all approach. And we need to be ready to be creative when adjusting the training structure to suit a dog's needs. 🐾

Leslie McDevitt, MLA, CDBC, CPDT is a dog behavior consultant and agility enthusiast who lives with her pack near Philadelphia. Leslie specializes in behavior modification for stressed and reactive performance dogs and is the author of the popular book, Control Unleashed: Creating a Focused and Confident Dog, published by Clean Run.

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