

Behaviour Modification

DS&CC to

Door Reactions



When your dog is already aroused, it is difficult to do any meaningful training. Set up specific times when you work on the door knock or doorbell desensitization exercise. Don't even involve a door yet – just work with the sound right now. You will redirect your dog's attention from the sound to you by giving him a treat every time the sound occurs. The sound of knocking or doorbell ringing is now going to predict that you produce treats FAR BETTER than the excitement of the visitor at the door.

Make sure you are wearing your treat pouch at all times, so that you can counter-condition to noises immediately when they occur, even outside of practice.

To practice, start with a soft knock on a wall or counter, far away from a door. The sound must be soft enough that it does not trigger your dog into barking. As soon as the sound is heard, your job is to get that food/treat into your dog's mouth, wherever he is. Do NOT say your dog's name. He doesn't have to turn towards you. Indeed, if he is lying on the floor and perhaps doesn't even get up, you just put the food into his mouth, wherever that mouth happens to be. The food is NOT contingent upon your dog's behaviour, but upon the occurrence of the noise.

Gradually proceed towards knocking either harder, or closer to the door, eventually knocking on the door at full strength, but always work below your dog's reaction threshold. Allow your dog to turn and look, if he wants to. We want him to be aware of his environment and changes in it. Don't get your dog's attention first and then knock on the door. That's cheating!! In real life, your dog isn't necessarily looking at you, a toy or food when the doorbell rings.

Your dog will soon become better. He will learn there is no one at the door but you. Now it's time to get someone else to knock or ring for you. Try an inside door first – the real front door with a real visitor might be too big a step. If your dog barks or reacts when your friend knocks on the door, still feed, but then ask your helper to soften the knock so that your dog does not react.

Next, you need to vary intervals between knocks (if a helper is knocking, instruct him to wait 10 seconds before he knocks again, then 30 seconds, then 20, then 30, then 10, and so on). Life is not predictable. Vary the frequency – sometimes you may do three sessions in a day, then maybe you will skip a day of training. Mix up the intensity – light knocks mixed with some heavy, demanding knocks. Vary the duration (knock-knock, next time knock-knock-knock-knock, next time only one knock). Change location (bathroom door, closet door, etc), change the stimuli (knocks, bells and buzzers). You can record the sound of your own doorbell on your smartphone and use that, starting on really low volume in order not to trigger your dog to bark. You can also purchase a cheap, battery operated doorbell at a home center or download doorbell ringtones from the internet onto your smartphone. By using your smartphone, you can lower the volume so that your dog does not go over threshold.

While doing this training, try to prevent your dog from hearing door sounds unless you are ready! Therefore, ask your friends to call you from the gate or from around the corner, before they come to your door, rather than knock or ring the doorbell, and meet them outside before they get to the door. Always carry good treats in your pockets in case there is a knock at the door, or other sound, that you may not have expected, and if barking does occur, throw a handful of food on the floor for your dog ("emergency food spill")

LATER, AS A SEPARATE EXERCISE

Ask your instructor how you can add to your dog's door skills! When your dog hears the doorbell, he can learn to run over and lie down on a special mat politely while the door is opened. However, we cannot teach him that until he is totally desensitized to the door sounds. ■