

Behaviour Modification

Excessive Attention-Seeking



Rewards Drive Behaviour

For the same reason that we can train a dog to perform a behaviour by providing timely rewards, so can we extinguish behaviours that we do not want the dog to perform by removing the dog's reward for that behaviour.

Before we can remove the reward, however, we must first identify what the reward is for the dog. That can sometimes be difficult, either because we simply have trouble figuring out what the reward might be, or because the reward is difficult to remove from the behaviour.

An easy example is begging at the table. If, in the past, somebody has been giving the dog tidbits from the table when she was begging, that food has of course rewarded the behaviour of begging. If you stop giving the dog food at the table and ignore the begging behaviour (and not reward it with your attention, either!), the behaviour of begging should eventually go away. However, we will likely get an Extinction Burst first (see below).

How about barking in the yard? For the dog, a reward for this behaviour could be when the owner opens the door and shouts at the dog to "Be Quiet!"; the owner just gave the dog attention! The behaviour of barking in the yard is reinforced by the owner's attention to it, and now it is more likely to happen again in the future. By instead ignoring the behaviour, it will eventually go away, so long as there is no other reward associated with it.

The Extinction Burst

Before a behaviour extinguishes, however, it is likely to get stronger for a while – "it gets worse before it gets better". When the dog's usual attempts at getting your attention don't work (for example by trying to get you to play with bites and nips), she will at first try harder to get the usual reaction. When she does that, it is very important to "stick to your guns" (see instructions below) and not give in. This "extinction burst" is a normal part of the process and its occurrence confirms that what you are doing is affecting the dog's behaviour! Good job! Ride it out!

Children & Play Bites

Over 50% of dog bite victims in the USA are under the age of 12 years old and many of these children are bitten by the family pet (*ref. Dr Sophia Yin DVM MS*). Bites often happen during play. Young puppies nip as part of play, and children are often not taught how to respond appropriately, or they are too young to be able to follow the instructions. This is one of the reasons why adult supervision of children and dogs at all times is IMPERATIVE! When the puppy nips, children tend to increase their movements and they sometimes scream and yell, just like a giant, live squeaky toy. No wonder the dog cannot resist! If the child then also throws himself on the floor, or stumbles, this further encourages the rough-housing.

In Public!

The dog's excessive attempts at getting attention can be embarrassing when the dog subjects visitors or strangers to it. The behaviour can become dangerous when the dog's arousal level is encouraged by erratic behaviour, or verbal or physical corrections – nips become play bites, and the bites get harder and harder as the dog's arousal level increases. Barking gets louder.

It is unfair to correct the dog for a behaviour that she has been encouraged for in the past, whether intentionally or not. When she was a puppy, she was precocious and cute, and almost all her attention-seeking behaviours were rewarded with attention, petting, treats and play. Now that she is an adult, what used to be a cute behaviour has become a liability!

Training Plan

- 1. MOST IMPORTANT PART: Teach the dog how to ask for your attention politely,** by IMMEDIATELY rewarding the kind of "Please?"-behaviour that you want, for example sitting quietly and giving you attention, or even just coming up and looking at you. When the dog comes up to you, and BEFORE she starts her annoying attention-seeking, ask her to sit (or lie down, if you prefer). When she does, pet her and tell her what a wonderfully well-behaved dog she is, or play with her, if that what she wants! If the petting excites her and she then starts to get pushy again, ignore that behaviour and wait for her to be polite again.
- 2. ALSO VERY IMPORTANT: Extinguish the unwanted behaviour** by instructing everybody that comes into contact with the dog to IGNORE her when she seeks attention with nudging, pushing, nipping or play-biting. Fold your arms and look sideways and upwards (*the "cut-off signal"*). Remember, the behaviour will get worse before it gets better. DO NOT GIVE IN to the temptation to even look at the dog, or talk to her or scold her. And whatever you do, don't giggle! Any interaction or feedback is likely to be perceived by the dog as rewarding. She's trying to "push your buttons"!
- 3.** A child should be instructed to 1) stand up straight, 2) perfectly still, 3) with his arms folded across his chest and 4) look at the floor ("*stand like a tree, fold your branches and look at your roots*"). This can be difficult for a young child to remember, so the parent needs to be patient with both the child and the dog, and expect to have to repeat these instructions often. Alternatively, the child and dog need to be separated.
- 4. Expect that it will take some time** before the old behaviour has been extinguished and the new behaviour has taken over. How long, will depend on:
 - a. How long your dog has successfully been rewarded for her inappropriate behaviour; and
 - b. How patient and consistent you and your family and friends are able to be in your interactions with the dog.
- 5. Watch your dog** through the corner of your eye when she approaches you; be ready to catch her BEFORE she jumps up, barks, whines, nips, etc and reinforce her for being polite BEFORE she has time to misbehave. If she looks like she is going to be rude, be ready to turn away and give your cut-off signal, or even to stand up and walk away. Continue to keep an eye on her, and when she changes her behaviour and is polite, reward her with your attention. But remember, it's better to reward good behaviour, catch her doing it right, even if she didn't mean to!

The dog does not gets less attention than before, just for a different way of asking for it!

Remember that if you have been rewarding your dog for perhaps several years, by giving her attention (either positive or negative) when she has been pushy and rude, the behaviour has a long and strong reinforcement history. In that case, change is not going to happen in a week, but may take several weeks or months of consistent application of these instructions to achieve reliable improvement.

If you have any questions or concerns about the application of this behaviour modification programme, please do not hesitate to contact Cowichan Canine. ■