

Solving Canine Behavior Problems

Melanie Travis Schlaginhaufen

Although behavioral modification programs to solve serious problems, such as aggression, are very individualized, there are certain steps that are always involved in solving any type of problem. These are outlined below.

1. Rule out medical issues. Have your dog checked out thoroughly by a knowledgeable veterinarian, to rule out any physical condition that may be causing the problem. For example, a dog with an ear infection can become head-shy, a dog with painful hips will not want a child to push on them, and an itchy dog could be hypersensitive and irritable, as could a dog with a hormonal imbalance. If a medical condition is found, be sure to ask about any behavioral side effects from any recommended medication.

2. Identify the triggers for the inappropriate behavior **and avoid them** during the initial phase of the behavioral modification program. *This is particularly important if you are trying to reduce aggressive behaviors.* Triggers need to be removed so the dog is not allowed to continue "practicing" negative behaviors. Each time a reaction occurs, it will be more likely to become ingrained as a permanent behavior. If it is not possible to remove the triggers, at least make sure you have your dog on a leash and training collar so that you will have the opportunity to interrupt the behavior if it occurs. Sometimes a trigger is removed for only for three weeks or so of the program, then gradually re-introduced, after we have trained in new behaviors to replace the inappropriate behavior. Dogs, like children, always need to be taught *what to do instead* (appropriate replacement behaviors that are incompatible with the problem behaviors).

3. Train in replacement behaviors that are incompatible with the unwanted behaviors. Think through what you want your dog to be doing *instead of* the inappropriate behavior. For example, you may want the dog to lay calmly on his dog bed in a corner of the living room instead of harassing visitors constantly for attention. Train in a very reliable response to "go to your bed" and work the dog daily, with distractions, on this behavior. Teach a dog to respond to a "stand-stay" command or a sit instead of jumping up. If you need help, work with an *experienced* professional trainer--ask your veterinarian for a recommendation, or go to the website for International Association of Canine Professionals, www.dogpro.org to search for a member in your area.

4. Interrupt the negative behavior immediately if it does occur. Don't buy into the oft-repeated advice of all-positive trainers who say if you ignore a behavior it will go away. Many inappropriate



behaviors are self-reinforcing, so they will become more and more ingrained if you ignore them. For example, biting at your pants leg is still fun for the dog even if you ignore it, so the dog is not going to stop doing it just because you do nothing about it.

5. Redirect the dog back to the replacement behavior so that he understands what he should be doing. As with the example of the dog who is overly friendly to visitors, tell him to "go to your bed" and insist that he comply, instead of allowing him to jump on or constantly nudge visitors for more petting.

6. Provide proper exercise and diet. Help your dog become less reactive through the use of exercise, proper diet and supplements. Exercise increases endorphins, which have a calming effect. Certain diets and supplements also have a positive influence on behavior. A trainer who specializes in solving behavioral problems should be able to give you recommendations on diet and supplements, as well as help you determine an exercise program that is feasible for your situation.

Questions? Please don't hesitate to email me at knowingdogs@hotmail.com.