



Confidence Building for Dogs Handbook

Dogs coming into a new home may be very scared of all the new noises, people, animals, sights, smells, and routine and, if you're reading this, then you very likely are either adopting or already live with a fearful dog.. We can use this protocol to help them ease into their new routine and realize that the world isn't as scary as they might think.

This handbook is designed to be easy to access, meaning you don't need to be an animal or behavior professional to understand the information or perform the training protocols in it. The first section does go over some technical terms to help you understand the techniques and mechanisms at play.



Regardless of your experience as a dog parent, if this is your first dog, your 100th dog, if you've worked with fearful dogs before or not, remember that behavior is fluid and it can and will change from day to day. One day you may think you're headed for a breakthrough and the next it seems like your dog is acting more fearful than ever before. That's ok. Just like with people, our mood and tolerance changes day to day. At various points in your training you may feel frustrated or defeated or that you have failed your dog, and that's completely normal. Take a break and come back to it later. Just know that your dog is trying the best and their hardest, just like you are, and nothing that they are or are not doing comes from spite, being mad at you, being stubborn, or trying to be dominant.

If you need further assistance with your dog, please contact us at behavior@alexandriaanimals.org and we will be happy to help!

Desensitization and Classical Conditioning

Desensitization is the process by which an animal becomes **less** affected by a stimulus. Your dog may benefit from desensitization training if they become stressed, fearful, or overstimulated by, for instance, other people, animals, sights, sounds, places, situations, grooming tools, etc. Through systematic desensitization, you can help your dog become less stimulated by or fearful of specific events or actions that would prompt undesirable behavior.

1. Establish at what point your dog becomes distressed by the stimulus and begin exposing them to it **just below** that point, where they are showing no reaction yet (your dog may not even be aware of its presence at this point). For example, if your dog is fearful of thunder or fireworks, find a recording and play it at a quiet enough volume that the dog is not showing any signs of distress yet. If your dog is fearful of other dogs or people, stand at a distance away from the

dogs/people that your pet can see them but is not showing any signs of stress. The most common signs of stress in dogs are:

- i. Tail lowering/tucking
 - ii. Ears going back
 - iii. Dilated eyes/"whale eye" (seeing the white of the iris)
 - iv. Lip licking/tongue flicking
 - v. Body stiffening/moving slowly
 - vi. Yawning
 - vii. Trembling
 - viii. Growling, lunging, barking
2. Continue exposing your dog to the stimulus for several days (or even more, depending on their reaction) at the same level of intensity.
 3. Gradually increase the intensity of the stimulus (by moving closer to it, staying in place longer, turning up the volume on a recording, etc) in increments so small that your dog does not even detect. For desensitization, allow your dog to carry out and engage in normal behaviors such as sniffing, walking and exploring, playing, etc. No action is required on our part with this process, as the goal is simply to expose your dog to increasing levels of the stimulus so slowly that they don't even notice they're being exposed to it, until the stimulus blends into part of the surroundings and your dog no longer reacts to them. If the situation allows it, you can give your dog their favorite interactive toy (Kong, long lasting chew, etc), play their favorite game, play calming music (classical music has been proven to have a calming effect on cats and dogs), or use a DAP (dog appeasing pheromone) plug in/spray or collar, at least during the desensitization process.

Counterconditioning (using classical conditioning to create a new emotional response to a trigger) is often paired with desensitization, as desensitization will effectively desensitize an animal to a stimulus, but counterconditioning goes one step further and creates a **new association** with the stimulus (a stimulus that was previously scary to the dog is now exciting). The key difference with counterconditioning is that we are actively **changing your dog's mind about how they feel about a certain stimulus by giving them something they like exclusively in the presence of the stress-inducing stimulus**. This will form a positive association with the stimulus to replace the negative one.

1. First, it is critical for counter conditioning that you have identified your pet's highest-value reinforcer, and that they do not have access to it outside of this training. The most common reinforcers include food items such as hot dog pieces, string cheese, canned chicken, plain baked ham, chicken or turkey cold cuts, or a favorite toy.
2. Begin in a quiet, non-distracting environment, if possible, where your dog is otherwise comfortable and relaxed. Determine at what intensity of the stimulus your dog begins to show any signs of distress. You should be as far away from the trigger as possible, or in a situation where the trigger is at the lowest intensity you can possibly get it.
3. Begin giving the high value treats the moment your dog sees/hears/enters the stimulus but is not reacting. If your dog reacts immediately and you have no time to get the treats to them, try engaging them with play or treats before the stimulus so that they are more likely to be in a positive mindset when exposed to the stimulus. If your dog is still reacting as soon as the stimulus is present, just try to find the point where they show the least amount of stress/fear and start from there. **The most important part of desensitization is finding the correct starting point so that you can increase the intensity gradually.**
 - a. Some examples of starting desensitization set-ups:
 - i. If your dog is fearful of people, other dogs, or certain spaces: start far enough away that the dog **isn't reacting**
 - ii. If your dog is fearful of sounds: start by playing a recording of the sounds at the **lowest** volume your dog can hear

- iii. If your dog is fearful of a crate: start with just rewarding the dog for being **near** the crate
- 4. Remove the stimulus (move away or have the stimulus go out of sight) and stop giving your dog treats.
- 5. After a minute, introduce the stimulus again and repeat the exact same procedure several times.
- 6. When your dog is expectantly looking to you for treats when they see/hear the stimulus or if enter the stressful situation and show no signs of distress, it is time to increase the intensity of the stimulus (get closer, play the sound louder, stay in the situation longer, etc) by the **smallest amount possible** (one second, one inch/foot, etc)--or until your dog becomes uncomfortable again and starts showing signs of stress.
- 7. Now repeat several times again.
 - a. If, at any time your dog begins to show fearful behaviors, you should go back to the intensity that you were last successful with and repeat more.
- 8. Repeat steps 1-4, gradually increasing the intensity of the stimulus with each session until it is at the desired intensity (usually the intensity at which the stimulus will be encountered in your dog's daily life). Only go as fast as your dog will allow. If you try to go too fast, you may end up **sensitizing** your dog to the stimulus, which will cause them to be more afraid and create more work for yourself and them. Listen to what your dog is telling you and let your dog be your feedback.
- 9. **ALWAYS** end trials with success! Give a jackpot reward--playtime, favorite enrichment, bully stick, etc--after sessions to maximize your dog's excitement for learning!

Note

→ D/CC training is all about building a **new** response to a distressing stimulus. As such, all exposure to the stimulus you are attempting to desensitize/counter condition your dog to must be avoided during the training process. If you progress too quickly, or your dog is exposed to the fearful stimulus in a non-controlled way and has a negative reaction, it will likely set you back a step or two (or even more, depending on the dog). Once a dog is in this type of situation, you have swapped from management/training to damage control, and the only goal is to get the dog out of the situation with as little damage done as possible.



1. Monsters ALWAYS cause Very Good Things
2. ONLY Monsters cause Very Good Things
3. Monsters must keep their DISTANCE, then, over many repetitions GRADUALLY get closer so that the dog is comfortable all the way through.

It is important to have the LOVE of the Very Good Things be stronger than the FEAR of the Monsters.

After many repetitions of...



You get...



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Touch aka Hand Targeting

The touch is a very simple and often very useful cue. If a dog is fearful or hand-shy, then teaching this trick is a great way to build confidence or trust that people and their touch is a good thing or even a great thing.

Teaching the Behavior

1. Hold your hand out (palm facing them) as close to your dog's nose as they're comfortable with (an inch or less is best, but if they give any stress signals, hold it further away). If they don't immediately touch your hand, as most dogs usually do, just wait at least a minute—they usually eventually will touch your hand.
 - a. Be as non-threatening as possible—kneel or sit down, look away, etc.
 - b. If they don't touch after a minute or so, and don't express any interest in your hand, try moving your hand around or moving it **away** from them to trigger a chase drive. If they still don't touch your hand, start with just rewarding any time they **look** at it.
 - c. If they get up or move away, just wait for them to settle, reset, and try again.
2. Once they touch your hand with their nose, mark (click or say "yes") and reward, giving a treat from your opposite hand. Continue to offer your hand 5 times total and keep track of how many times your dog is successful. After 5/5 successful targets, move on to the next step.
3. Repeat, gradually moving your hand further and further away from the dog and alternating hands. Once the dog is reliably touching your hand with their nose, then you can add the verbal cue "touch" **just before** they touch your hand. If your dog targets your hand 4/5x or less, drop to moving your hand closer, or remain at the same distance if you're already as close to your dog as they are comfortable with you being.
4. When the dog is consistently touching your hand without hesitation, you can start rewarding additional body contact. **Any time the dog makes contact with you, be it their paw, shoulder, hind end etc., mark (click or say "Yes!") and reward.**

Troubleshooting

- Be patient and wait for your dog to touch your hand. It can take several seconds to a minute at first sometimes.
- Give lots of breaks and do very short sessions (5 minutes or even less) or however long your dog **wants** to train.

Petting

It's the conundrum as old as time itself: We want to pet every dog but not every dog **wants** to be pet. We can use counterconditioning (as explained above) to help them learn to **enjoy** being petted. This will help your dog feel more comfortable with petting and, hopefully, help them open up more to receiving and even soliciting interactions.

Teaching the Behavior

1. Sit on the ground with your side towards your dog looking away from them. If your dog is extremely fearful, you may have to lure them to you with treats, but ideally your dog should be **comfortable enough to approach you on their own** before beginning this protocol.
2. When your dog is within an arm's length of you, slowly put your hand on them briefly and gently.
 - a. Places most dogs prefer to be touched/petted:
 - i. Chin/neck/side of face
 - ii. Chest
 - iii. Base of tail/rear

- b. Places most dogs do **not** prefer to be touched/petted:
 - i. Top of head (don't put your hand **over** their head—this looks very scary from their perspective!)
 - ii. Paws/legs (these are very sensitive and important to dogs!)
 - iii. Tail
3. After approximately one to two seconds, move your hand away and offer them a treat.
4. Continue to repeat steps 2 and 3 until your dog relaxes their body and face and is no longer showing fear of your reaching toward or touching them.
5. Now you can begin petting for longer than a couple seconds at a time, **gradually** building up to a minute or two (in increments of a **few seconds at a time!**) and petting them all over their body, again moving your hand around to different areas **very gradually**.

Tips

- Always remember to present the stimulus **first**, and **then** reward; in this case: reach, pet, **then** treat.
- Practice this protocol in the same place each time (same room, same yard, same office, etc.). Then, once your dog is comfortable with petting, try moving to different locations, and try switching hands if you're prone to using the same hand each time.
- Be sure your dog has a way to remove themselves if needed. Never block escape routes and **always allow your dog to leave or not participate** if they want.

Troubleshooting

- Is your dog consistently being avoidant of you? Be sure you're not facing them head-on or leaning over them. **Consider whether your treats are high-value and rewarding enough to outweigh their fear of being pet.** You may also want to drop back to a previous protocol such as Touch to practice some more.

Teaching Fearful Dogs to Walk on Leash

Leash walking does not come naturally for dogs—having something tighten around their neck is a scary experience at first! This means the first step to leash walking is to desensitize the dog to the leash being around their neck. Hopefully they have been wearing a collar at least, so the feeling isn't completely foreign. (Note: if the dog is already panicking about a leash being around their neck, try attaching a leash to a harness first, so that the pressure is not on their neck.) Begin by attaching the leash to the dog's collar (or harness) and allowing it to **drag around on the floor behind them** in the home (or wherever your dog is most comfortable—maybe this is outside or in their favorite person's room). **Do not even attempt to pick up the leash at this time**—just put it on and take it off calmly and gently. Always supervise this time to ensure that the leash does not get caught on anything, and give your dog treats or play with their favorite toy as you do so! **Make leash time fun, and the fun ends as soon as the leash comes off.** Make sure that the leash is light and made of fabric so that it does not make scary noises that will cause your dog to startle and perpetually run away from it. **Never use a retractable leash for this reason!**

After a few desensitization sessions, attach the leash and this time practice your dog following you around the house, getting treats every time they come to you, or walks with you, as you move around. If you have a fenced in yard, open the door and allow your dog to go outside with the leash attached (or come inside if they've been outside). After a few more sessions practicing this, see if you can pick the leash up. If your dog suddenly shows signs of fear when you pick it up such as: crouching, dropping their stomach to the ground, ears back, tail tucked, eyes wide, drop the leash and continue practicing without holding it until they are not fearful when you pick it up. The first few times you hold the leash, **allow your dog to lead the way**, and simply follow them, holding the leash with **plenty of slack**. Applying pressure suddenly may cause them to panic and become frantic or “pancake” on the ground, both creating

negative associations with the leash. If you notice your dog seems as though they are trying to get away from you, creating a tight leash, back up to the previous step of allowing them to drag the leash while you practice picking it up and holding it. If you push your dog too hard too fast, you will have extra work to do to further desensitize them.

The most important part of teaching a dog to walk on a leash is to never yank, drag, or “correct” your dog with the leash. **This is a good way to teach them to fear the leash!** If your dog won’t walk, gently encourage them with treats, toys, or whatever motivates them. Try using a playful, excited, high-pitched tone of voice. High pitched tones have been proven to increase dogs’ excitement levels, and therefore their activity levels. Try making playful, bouncy movements and tapping the ground (mimicking a dog’s play bow), as if you’re about to play with them. You can also try creating a trail of treats by tossing treats onto the floor as your dog walks to eat them. If they need something a little more motivating than treats, try luring them with a long-handled spoon with peanut butter or cream cheese on it.

Most dogs will begin to walk on leash on their own in time, as they learn to trust people. So just be patient and loving and let the dog know they can trust you!

Safe Haven

A safe haven is an important place for your dog to have within the home. This can be a place to help fearful dogs feel more comfortable, give reactive dogs a temporary place to be removed from triggers, or just a place that your dog can go to during the day when they feel like being alone.

Creating a Safe Haven:

Create an area for your dog to go to that enables them to be able to remove themselves and be alone. The area should be somewhere that is quiet and more removed from the rest of the home and should be a very comfortable place such as a bed, pillow, crate (if they like their crate), etc. You can feed their meals, and give toys that they get exclusively when they are in their safe haven. When introducing them to the new safe haven space give them lots of treats and feed them incrementally to help build a positive association with the space.

For Fearful Dogs:

Many fearful dogs will benefit from having a safe haven to be able to have space to remove themselves if/when they feel overwhelmed. This could be during a thunderstorm, when there are new and unfamiliar people over, if there’s a lot of activity in the home, or during any time that the dog is feeling stressed. The area should be somewhere that is quiet and more removed from the rest of the home and should be a very comfortable place such as a bed, pillow, crate (if they like their crate), etc. You can feed their meals, and give toys that they get exclusively when they are in their safe haven. When introducing them to the new safe haven space give them lots of treats and feed them incrementally to help build a positive association with the space. Once they have acclimated to this space keep access to it open for them at all times and they should start going to it on their own when needed.

For Reactive Dogs:

Creating a safe haven can also be a key part of a reactive dog’s management within the home. If your dog is reactive to certain stimuli it can sometimes be impossible or unavoidable to avoid their triggers (novel people coming to the home, children, people at the door, etc.). If/when these triggers occur, lead your dog to their safe haven (ideally, before they begin reacting. Example- set your dog up in their safe haven before your guests come over) and give them either their meal or treats through a puzzle toy, a long lasting chew, or toys that they will play with by themselves. We want to set them up to be able to keep themselves entertained and busy the entire time they’re in the safe haven should they not fall asleep.

- **Space Guarding:**

If your dog guards space on the couch, chairs, bed or other furniture then creating a safe haven

in the same room near you may be beneficial. If/when your dog does climb up on the furniture lure them off and then onto the safe haven with high value treats. In this instance, you don't need to worry about the area being quiet and removed, but it should still be very comfortable and enticing as we want your dog to want to and enjoy going there to provide a better alternative than jumping on the furniture. This area should also only be for your dog and them alone.

- **Item/Resource Guarding:**

If your dog guards resources such as food, treats, toys, etc. then creating a safe haven for them to eat or relax with their favorite toy may be a good part of their management, especially when visitors come over. You can feed them and give them chews, toys, or anything else they may guard in their safe haven to avoid either yourself or anyone else accidentally coming between your dog and their resource.

Puzzle Toys/Enrichment for Confidence Building

Puzzle toys or food-dispensing toys can be a great way for a nervous dog who is food-motivated to build confidence. **Solving puzzles helps dogs build confidence by allowing them to use their natural problem solving skills and learn that they have control over their environment.** There are lots of toys that all vary in their degrees of difficulty. Start with something easy, like a ball with a big hole for treats to fall out of, or a cardboard box with a handful of treats in it and the ends folded over, and let the dog play with the toy to figure out how to get the treats out. As they get better and faster at these puzzles, you can buy or make new toys that are harder (smaller holes, more complex moving parts, etc). Licking/chewing is also a calming and stress relieving behavior, so lick mats (lickimat.com) are a great way to provide an outlet for this natural behavior—simply put some creamy food (wet dog food, peanut butter, cream cheese, yogurt, etc) on the mat and freeze it for a few hours so it lasts a while (you can use a large plate or frisbee as a cheap alternative). Bully sticks are also a great resource for calming.

Sniffing is a great way to help dogs gain confidence. Sniffing is how dogs see the world (their sense of smell is like our sense of sight—they rely on it more than the other senses). Going for sniffy walks or to areas on a long leash (20 foot +) so dogs can decide where to go and what to sniff helps them gain a better sense of their environment and feel more safe in it. You can also buy or make a “snuffle mat” (think carpet with a high pile so treats can get down in between the fabric) and let them sniff out food/treats.

Resources for enrichment:

- Ninaottosson.com (Outward Hound)
- Kongcompany.com (select “Interactive & Tug” category)
- Lickimat.com
- Himalayan Pet Supplies (they have great bully sticks/chews)



DOGGIE LANGUAGE

starring Boogie the Boston Terrier



ALERT



SUSPICIOUS



ANXIOUS



THREATENED



ANGRY



"PEACE!"
look away/head turn



STRESSED
yawn



STRESSED
nose lick



"PEACE!"
sniff ground



"RESPECT!"
turn & walk away



"NEED SPACE!"
whale eye



STALKING



STRESSED
scratching



STRESS RELEASE
shake off



RELAXED
soft ears, blinky eyes



"RESPECT!"
offer his back



FRIENDLY & POLITE
curved body



FRIENDLY



"PRETTY PLEASE"
round puppy face



"I'M YOUR LOVEBUG"
belly-rub pose



"HELLO I LOVE YOU!"
greeting stretch



"I'M FRIENDLY!"
play bow



"READY!"
prey bow



"YOU WILL FEED ME"



CURIOUS
head tilt



HAPPY
(or hot)



OVERJOYED
wiggly



"MMMM...."



"I LOVE YOU,
DON'T STOP"



Body Language of Fear in Dogs



Slight Cowering



Major Cowering

More Subtle Signs of Fear & Anxiety



Licking Lips
when no food nearby



Panting
when not hot or thirsty



Brows Furrowed, Ears to Side



Moving in Slow Motion
walking slow on floor



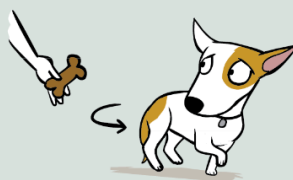
Acting Sleepy or Yawning
when they shouldn't be tired



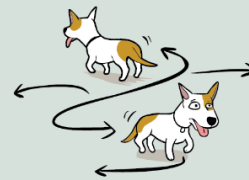
Hypervigilant
looking in many directions



Suddenly Won't Eat
but was hungry earlier



Moving Away



Pacing



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★ **ALWAYS** respect any request your dog makes for space (as seen in the stress signals illustrated above), or your dog will never learn to trust you. And remember not to take it personally or punish these signals (including growling/snarling/snapping)—this is how dogs communicate, and **removing these warnings could result in a dangerous dog who bites without warning!**