

The Double Reward For Shy Dogs/cats

By Dee Ganley and Nancy Lyon

There is no question that dealing with the shy dog or cat can be very frustrating - primarily because they won't interact enough for us to develop a reinforcement relationship. If we don't have something they want we can't develop trust.

We've tried this approach in our shelter as a way to get that reinforcement relationship started. First, leave the dog or cat alone in their kennel or cage for at least 3-4 days – only bringing them food and water. During this time make no eye contact and don't talk or interact in any way. (For safety and handling purposes we do leave a short 4-foot tag line attached to a buckle collar for the first two weeks.)

At the end of the 3-4 days you should see that the animal is moving around its kennel/cage more. This is when the fun part begins. Now every time you pass by their kennel or cage toss in some tasty treats (like hotdogs, bits of meat, string cheese), but keep on walking by. Soon you should notice the dog/cat peeking out of its kennel/cage to see where you are. At this point walk down and pause for a second to toss the treat hopefully before the animal retreats. After tossing the treat keep moving past the kennel or cage. This is its second reward – the first reward is the food and the second reward for coming out to get the food is to have the scary human leave. We never face the animal - this is all done with our side presented to the animal.

Most of us horse people have done this for years with foals who always seem to run to the other side of its dam. So we would toss some sweet feed and keep going. The foal is so curious he would come out and look for us. When the animal is looking and standing still then we just pause for a second and then keep moving away. The animal thinks that if it moves towards us, it will get something good & we will eventually move on. Soon the pause can be lengthened and you have an animal that will stand still and take something from us. They seem to be able to tolerate our handing it to them, because they have learned to expect us to move on. Over time as it takes longer for us to walk away after giving the treat, we can get to where we just stand in front of the cage and squat down sideways. The animal will walk right up and take something from us and we don't have to leave immediately. Timing is all. Allow the dog or cat to tell you how much of you they can tolerate before you need to leave.

Yes, you must have patience and good timing, but it works and in less than four-five days and 50 repetitions you will have a fearful animal looking for ward to your approaching them. For the shy dogs at our kennel we will hang a treat bag on the front of its kennel with a sign "Please don't look at me just toss a treat as you pass". Soon the sign reads "Ok now you can say hi give a treat and keep moving" and by the fourth day it will say "Ok I'm ready for you to squat down and toss a treat as you say my name". By the fifth day we are opening the cage and letting the dog take food from our hand and picking up the leash and hopefully taking he/she out for a walk. Keeping our back to the dog and tossing treats if the dog will take it.

If we are working with a cat then we are waiting for the cat to touch our pointed finger before getting the anticipated treat, and then stroking (it if possible) before the treat.

Once we have the dog to this point we would start the "targeting through fear" exercise.