
Automatic Look Back

Purpose

Dogs will bark, chase and bite things for entirely natural reasons. Some of those reasons are based in play/prey (learning to hunt) and some are fear based (feeling threatened by other dogs, children or adults). The automatic look back is how to teach your dog to look to you on his own. With your leadership, the dog can develop the self control to thoughtfully observe his environment, and look to you if he is uncertain how to react.

For the dog trained to look back, the default behaviour when other dogs or children are present becomes looking at the handler instead of barking, growling or pulling on the lead.

This exercise teaches the dog to become a thoughtful observer instead of a barking reactor to new or scary situations, and to automatically look to you for leadership and reassurance.

Preparation

Have a pouch of yummy treats and a hungry dog on lead.

If the dog's problem is dog-to-dog aggression, the training situation should be carefully set up. The unfamiliar dog (the "stimulus") must have a non-reactive temperament, be on lead, and be handled by a helper working under your instruction so you can maintain an acceptable distance between the dogs. Never stimulate a fearful dog into practicing fearful or aggressive behaviour. Set up the training so you arouse your dog only enough to give you the chance to reinforce the alternate behaviour of looking toward you and away from the trigger stimulus.

Choose a calm, non-reactive dog (we call this a "stooge dog"). You must be 100% certain that the stooge dog will never become aroused or excited by the over reactive dog. Work the stooge dog with lots of other dogs before you ever work him with a reactive dog.

Process

This example uses a helper and stooge dog as the scary situation for the dog in training.

Stand at a distance from the helper. Have a handful of treats ready. The helper and “Life like” dog should begin to move around, but should stay at a pre-planned distance.

When the helper gets close enough to give the dog about 4 feet of play in the lead, wait for the dog to look back at you. Don't let the trigger stimulus get so close that the dog chooses to lunge or bark. The dog is likely to look back at you, if only to see why you aren't moving. The instant the dog checks in, mark with a click or the word “yes” and reinforce by hand feeding 15 pieces of treats, one at a time. If your dog is able to catch the treats, toss them gently to him. This keeps him focused on you so he won't miss catching a treat. If you feed from your hand, do so with the treat in your palm, palm open, so the dog lick the treat instead of grabbing at your fingers.

While feeding, have a happy conversation with the dog for 10-15 seconds. Use your face and your voice, as well as the food, to keep your dog's attention on you and away from the trigger stimulus.

While you are feeding, the helper should quietly retreat.

Your goal is to see your dog look at you, and to be stay focused on you for increasing duration, whether or not there are distractions. The dog will learn self control pays big time.

Once the dog is consistently checking in at the current distance, and is exercising self control (he can watch but doesn't lunge, growl, or bark), you can begin to raise the level of distraction. Gradually decrease the distance, or change the location, of the trigger stimulus in relation to the dog. Create new situations, and reward the dog for looking back to you.

Practical Tips

- Always set up the dog for success, not failure; never push beyond your dog's ability to choose you over the stimulus.
- Manage the dog so you are always present when the trigger stimulus is in sight is the most critical part of your training plan. You have to be there (physically and mentally), and the trigger stimulus must be under your control. For example, if your dog is obsessed with the cat, the dog must never have access to the cat unless you are there and prepared to reward for alternative behaviour. When you are there training your dog to ignore the cat, the cat must be in a safe area. For example, have the cat in the arms of a helper should, or have a baby gate between the dog and the cat.

- For dogs with very high prey behaviour or fear aggression, management and training is a lifelong pursuit. Reinforce the look back with food until the dog is fluent in the look back behaviour. Over time, you can begin to use alternative types of reinforcement, such as a play or praise.
- You are training a behaviour substitution. You will get improvement early, but it will be gradual. Be persistent and patient. Counterconditioning fear is a marathon, not a sprint. Do not expect permanent change for at least three to six months, perhaps longer.
- Good leaders are proactive. This means you continuously anticipate what might trigger a reaction from your dog, and intervene before the dog becomes stimulated. This means you have the food and the energy to reinforce every act of self control. This means when you are with your dog, you always have part of your attention on him, constantly reading changes in his posture that may indicate arousal.