

Lowering Arousal: How to Train Impulse Control

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We used to say a trained dog is a free dog, a dog that could go with us anywhere on or off lead. They knew how to “behave” in the human-controlled world. But what we should have said is: A dog with self-control is a free dog. Freedom for dogs has everything to do with impulse control and little to do with whether they can heel or shake their paw. Dogs have to live safely and non-aggressively in a man-made world. Our responsibility to our dogs means training impulse control, which leads to teaching self-control.

In my experience, a few dogs are born with low arousal levels and they have a natural sense of self-control. But I find that there seem to be less and less of these dogs. This may be because of breeding priorities that don't include low arousal, or it may just mean that most dogs don't live in rural environments and therefore they don't come with very good natural programming to live in a mainly human-controlled world. I think dogs living in a busy household or environment never learn self control because they are constantly being stimulated and conditioned to be up and active, particularly ones who might be crated for long periods of time. When these dogs are then let out of the crate, owners often allow them to pace and be continually active in the home environment. Dogs like this can lose their ability to control themselves, similar to what can happen to dogs in a shelter environment. Dogs that are continually aroused can have higher cortisol levels¹

Many dogs today are easily and quickly aroused by the movements of our daily life. We need from the very beginning to reduce arousal by training (or substituting) calm behavior. The “Chill Out Game” is one method of installing an arousal “turn off” switch when dogs are playing. For some dogs, however, there are many external “arousal” triggers that we must identify and then train substitute behaviors for our dog's natural over reaction.

Lowering arousal, which can lead to aggression^{2,3}, requires teaching your dog behaviors that are calming and require your dog's attention and self-control. Sitting or a relaxed down are good behaviors one cause? could train to substitute in for the unwanted arousal reaction.

You must begin in a quiet, calm location. Start with training a very reliable sit or relaxed down. Make this training fun with lots of treats. You will then move to training the “Chill Out Game” to help your dog learn to turn his aroused state on and off.

The “Chill Out” Game

Play can be an important reinforcer for dogs who need to learn self-control. The “Chill Out” game is designed to use the opportunity to play as the reward for self-control. The particular importance of this game is that it will teach the dog that he can go from really high arousal to instant calm—this game will help you install an “on/off” switch. The goal is to teach the dog that he can substitute a calm behavior for his agitated state. Examples would be performing a competing behavior like fetching a specific toy (that the dog finds comforting) or going to a particular place and lying down to then earning a treat of some sort. The reinforcer you use will of course depend on the specific dog!

There are many versions of this particular game this is the one I most use.

The game involves deliberately getting the dog fired up to play and then having him “chill out” on cue. This can help to teach the dog to calm himself in high-excitement situations, such as when he is around children, or when company comes to the home.

- First you need to teach either a sit or down that is very reliable.
- Now get the dog excited by playing tug or chasing a toy on a string, or play wrestling game or pinchy pinch if that's what he normally likes to play with you. In the middle of the game, stop all play, become like a tree and quietly ask for a sit or down. The dog's reward for sitting is to immediately re-engage them in the game. The dog will learn quickly that their calm sit or down is what gets the game going again. You can play around with varying the length of time the dog has to sit before playing again, vary the cue (sit, down, or simply settle), and vary the length of the playing.

Once you have taught the game, you need to add short bursts of activity interspersed with quiet times, which I find is what normal dogs do given the chance. For example, play or practice recalls or go running for five to ten minutes and then have quiet time for approximately 15-20 minutes. Your goal is to start to arouse your dog with activity and then bring him down before he loses control.

You must hold yourself accountable for really watching the dog and learning when to step in to ask for the cooling off behavior to lower the dogs arousal. You may need to keep a diary for a few days to discover the rhythm of the day and know when best to engage the dog. I find it is really helpful to keep a point system. Give yourself 20 points for each successful encounter, which means there was no loss of impulse control. And deduct 2,000 points if your dog losses control. This way you will know where you stand. Your goal is to accumulate 1,000 points.

If you work in short sessions, you are likely to gain the most points! Long sessions may actually further reinforce the "get revved and keep going till you fall over" pattern of response. This response can carry over to barking and eventually aggressing at You which is not our goal. You want to anticipate "turning the arousal switch" off before your dog loses self-control.

Consistency and lots of practice produces the best and most lasting results. Fortunately for us, in my experience dogs enjoy practicing the same thing over and over if we have kept it fun and brief. Interrupting and redirecting inappropriate behavior very early is the key to reinforcing self-control. While I find formal obedience training is good goal, the very foundation of this behavior must be based on the dog achieving emotional self-control.

What should you be looking for when your dog is "on?" Your dog should appear "happy" yet able to focus his attention on you. The moment you see your dog unable to focus on you because his arousal is escalating, stop the game. This might occur because the dog is starting to go into his "own little world." This is usually indicated by the dog no longer playing with You but rather beginning to initiate a different or more intense game. I might see something as simple as faster and/or harder movements, or actually using his mouth, teeth, or paws to connect with my body. This is when you should use your "off" switch to bring the dog back to you. During the "off" behavior I am waiting to see signs that the dog's arousal level has shifted: a softening of the overall muscular body tension and the return of more "normal" eye movement. The dog stops staring at me in anticipation of more action and begins to appear more aware of what's happening around him. I need to make sure that I am relaxed too or it's not going to help the dog. Wait to see signs of overall relaxation. The dog will often "soften" as he lets go of the muscle tension, and this may even be accompanied by a good sigh of relief. If you haven't gone overboard with the "on" part, then the "off" should follow quite quickly. Be patient!

At this point, provide the dog with a nice, needed reinforcement. It puts their "patience" into perspective. It may take a few minutes to achieve, but coming down to a less aroused emotional state is not easy. If you've overdone it, and that's most likely as you fine tune your ability to read individual dogs, just be patient, ask for the "off" behavior, and then be still yourself. You'll want to stand quietly relaxed (joints flexed, jaw soft, slow blink rate, slow deep breathing) and wait till the dog relaxes, however long it might take. Be sure and watch that you also are giving off clear relaxed body signals. Be soft and supple while standing relaxed. Ahhh, there you have it! Remember we all need some amount of impulse control. Some of us must learn how to achieve self control while with others it happens naturally.

1. *Hennessy, M. B., Voith, V. L., Mazzei, S. J., Buttram, J., Miller, D. D., & Linden, F., (2001). Behavior and cortisol levels of dogs in a public animal shelter, and an exploration of the ability of these measures to predict problem behavior after adoption. Appl. Anim. Behav. Sci. 73, 217-233.*

2. *Beaver, B. (1999). Canine behavior: a guide for veterinarians. Philadelphia, PA: W.B. Saunders Company, pp. 152-157.*

3. *Lindsay, Steven. (2001). Handbook of applied dog behavior and training: volume 2. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, pp. 254-257*