BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION TREATMENT METHODS TO RE-INTRODUCE FIGHTING HOUSEHOLD DOGS

Note the handlers are on the inside and the dogs are on the outside. This creates added distance between them, and there isn’t an opportunity to get into any bouts of prolonged eye contact which can create confrontation.

It is important to walk a suitable distance apart, where your dogs will happily walk along, without feeling the need to react. Note that these dogs are in a neutral, quiet and wide open area to do this work. Never push your dogs further than they can handle. The more they get into the habit of reacting towards each other, the longer it will take to break the habit.

Before you start any re-introduction work, you will need to have some basic foundations behaviors and clicker training skills in place for both of the dogs and the handlers. Working with a qualified or certified clicker trainer such as a Karen Pryor Academy Certified Training Partner to attain these skills is crucial. Separate training sessions with each dog to get these basics accomplished during low distraction times is needed.

Basic foundation training enables you and your dogs to communicate more easily with one another (which is less stressful for everyone), and helps the dogs to understand how the world works, which reduces their stress. A good training program emphasizes structure and consistency, both of which make a dog’s world more predictable. Predictability equals less stress; unpredictably is very stressful.

Foundation and clicker trained behaviors will also be used for Response Substitution (RS) during this process. This means asking the dogs to do a previously well learned easy behavior that is rewardable (such as sit, hand target, high five, etc.) that is INCOMPATIBLE with an undesired behavior (such as barking and lunging) in the presence of a trigger.

Once you have good foundation behaviors and clicker training skills under your belt, you will be ready we can begin sessions that will gradually re-introduce the dogs in controlled settings with your trainer’s guidance.

Here is a handout that might be helpful on how to Manage Triggers: Counter Conditioning, Response Substitution and Desensitization

Please read this excellent four part blog by Sara Reusche on Dog to Dog Aggression Between Housemates and how she was able to work with her two dogs after a very serious bite.
Sara illustrates some very helpful methods

Part One: The Fight
Part Two: Bites
Part Three: Management
Part Four: Training

The first step in training is changing the dogs’ opinion of each other through counter-conditioning and desensitization (CC/DS).

This involves changing your dogs’ association with each other from negative to positive. The easiest way to give most dogs a positive association is with very high-value, really yummy treats like chicken or cheese in very small pieces. But find out what treats work best for your dogs.

Here’s an example of how to set up the CC/DS process:

1. Determine the distance at which your dogs can be in each other’s presence and be alert or wary but not extremely fearful or aroused. This is called the threshold distance. If one dog has a greater threshold hold distance than the other (often the case), work at the greater distance.

2. With you holding the more reactive dog on a loose leash, have your helper handler appear with the calmer dog at the threshold distance. The instant the more reactive dog sees the other dog appear at a distance, start feeding a very high value treat such as bits of chicken non-stop! The helper should feed chicken to the other dog who is at a distance, also at the instance the calmer dog notes the more reactive dog.

3. After several seconds, have the helper step out of sight with calmer dog at a distance, and you both stop feeding chicken.

4. Keep repeating steps 1-3 until the sight of the other dog at the threshold distance consistently causes both dogs to look at their handler with a happy smile and a “Yea! Where’s my chicken!?“ expression.

This is the goal! The physical presentation of the dogs’ CONDITIONED EMOTIONAL RESPONSE (CER)! Each dog’s association with the other is now positive at least at this threshold distance. Within the sight of one another, they can deliberately look at you to get their chicken, rather than staying intensely focused or worried about each other.

To explain this in a little more detail please read my handout on Creating a Positive Conditioned Emotional Response (CER). In this handout the trigger is actually an unfamiliar dog instead of a housemate dog but you will see the idea is the same.

5. Once you have a great CER, you can gradually begin to increase the length of time the calm dog stays in the more reactive dog’s sight. Continue to feed chicken when they are in view of each other, occasionally pause to let them look at each other again, and then immediately feeding chicken when they do.

6. When the length of time seems to make no difference to either dog and you are getting a consistent “Yay, where’s my chicken!?“ response regardless of how long the helper dog stays in view, increase the intensity again, this time by increasing the helper dog’s movement. Have the helper handler slowly walk back and forth with the calmer dog or ask her to do some behaviors such as sit or down.

7. Next you can gradually try to move the calmer helper dog a little closer to see if you can decrease the threshold distance. Do not rush this process. The goal is to always stay below the threshold of reactivity. If
you move too fast and either dog reacts, go back to below where you last had success and move more slowly next time. We want to maintain the power of the CER! Great things need to continue to happen in the presence of one another.

If you can achieve consistent CERs with movement and decreasing distance than the next step can be trying parallel walks.

Sara Reusche describes in her blog post re-introducing her dogs using Parallel walks outdoors with two handlers.

- She started with short walks multiple times a day.
- She started just halfway to the corner at first, and then went all the way to the corner.
- She started by walking the dogs across the street from one another
- She was moving them in the same direction but allowing for plenty of parallel distance between them.
- Both dogs were given treats for looking at the other dog in a soft manner
- They also received frequent rewards for walking nicely.
- If either dog began to look tense or nervous, they immediately veered further away from one another, giving them even greater space and distance.
- When they were both soft and relaxed, they moved slightly closer, lessening the distance between the two.
- Within a week, the two dogs were able to walk side-by-side in a relaxed manner.
  The dogs began sniffing each other as they walked, and following one another to especially enticing smells.
- They started to urine mark over special smells together.
- While they were still kept completely separate indoors, their outdoor walks allowed them to start interacting as a team once again.

To begin working on reintegrating the dogs indoors, Sara utilizes a favorite tool for behavior modification – Karen Overall’s Protocol for Relaxation. Once you have some basic foundation behaviors and cues well learned, you can start to practice these relaxations exercises individually with each dog.

- This protocol is a set of biofeedback exercises designed to teach dogs to relax while stuff happens around them.
- The protocol is designed to go at the dog’s pace.
- Dogs should be able to hold a relaxed sit or down stay for 15 seconds prior to starting the protocol.
- It’s important to realize that this is not an obedience exercise.
- The goal is relaxation, not merely compliance with the stay.
- This means that owners should not progress to the next task set until the dog is able to be relaxed through the current task set, regardless of the dog’s ability to hold his position.
- If the dog chooses to slide into a down from his sit position, it should not be corrected for doing so.
- It can be helpful to start this exercise with the dog lying on a mat.
- You may choose to speak softly to your dog through the whole protocol or to remain quiet: it depends on which is most helpful to your dog’s relaxation.
- Experiment with your dog and see what works best.
- Move slowly and smoothly while doing the various tasks, and reward your dog after each individual task.
- Over time, the Protocol for Relaxation can bring about a powerful change in dogs who could not previously relax.
As your dog learns to relax in the context of the protocol, you can help him generalize this behavior to new environments by taking your dog’s mat on the road and going through the protocol in new locations.

Remember to decrease your expectations when you go anywhere new, and always be ready to leave if you determine that you’ve pushed your dog too far.

A Good Video Explanation of how the PROTOCOL FOR RELAXATION works is in this video: https://vimeo.com/19875523

At first this protocol may seem tedious and time consuming but it can work if you are willing to follow it.

• Using the recorded MP3 Files of the protocol versus trying to read the protocol and work it at the same time make this MUCH EASIER to follow.

Below are links to Karen Overall’s PROTOCOL FOR RELAXATION:

- The Full Written Protocol from Dr. Overall’s textbook
- The Relaxation Protocol Audio Files

Remember listening to the audio files make this relaxation protocol much easier to follow! The instructions are simple and are simply read to you while you work with your dog.

CONDITIONING A RELAXED RESPONSE is important because it will enable your dogs to both better deal with each other, as they will be less aroused or stressed in general and thus further from their thresholds of reactivity.

Recognizing what your dogs look like when they are relaxed is important. Every dog is different, so remember that we are looking for a dog who is not stressed, but may not necessarily be sleepy. Most dogs will exhibit soft eyes; loose muscles; still or softly wagging tails that appear heavy, with the base relaxed; and a gently open mouth. You should note a lack of muscle ridges, especially around the brows and mouth. Relaxed dogs will breathe deeply and evenly. Watch for these signs!

Click here are some more ideas for Teaching Calm: Settle and Relaxation Training

Teaching Relax on a Mat is another excellent relaxation method