

Counterconditioning

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Counterconditioning is a training technique that is used when you want to replace an unwanted behaviour with one, which you will find more acceptable. Using this technique, dogs that jump up on visitors at the door, attack the vacuum whenever you turn on the switch, or roll over and urinate when greeting you can be trained to go quietly to their beds and lie down instead.

The first thing you must do is to identify the situation in which the dog first starts to misbehave. For example, the dog that jumps up on company might start barking or scratching the door as visitors approach. As the dog's excitement increases, his behaviour progressively deteriorates until the scene at the door is unmanageable. If this is the case, you will want to train the dog to perform the alternate behaviour before you open the door.

You must also determine what alternate behaviour you want to train the dog to perform. This can be anything that you want, however, it must be **incompatible** with the behaviour you are trying to replace. A dog that rolls over and urinates when you greet it could be taught to stand on all four feet while being greeted, or to stand with the front feet on a chair or stool. However, teaching it to lie down in greeting situation would still allow it to roll over and urinate. Most people find that the most acceptable behaviour is to have the dog go to its bed and lie down.

Start training the dog, in a quiet environment and off the leash, to do the alternative behaviour on command. Training should be done in a situation unrelated to one in which the unwanted behaviour occurs. You will want to choose a one word command for the behavior you want to teach, something like "Bed" or "Kitchen". Do not repeat the command over and over, or bury it in a sentence, which trains the dog to wait for the command you *really* mean. Instead, use the word alone.

The training should be done with food rewards, so you will need to select a special treat that the dog really likes and that he only gets during training sessions. Tiny pieces of cheese, cheesies and thin slices of hot dog are all good treats.

When you start training, give the command "Bed", and when the dog goes to his bed (even if he just stands on it) reward him immediately (within ½ second!) with a piece of cheese. Once he has the idea, you can make him lie down, by giving the command "Down" once he reaches his bed, and immediately rewarding him for responding correctly. When you start training, you should give the treat every time the dog performs correctly, as this will increase the speed he learns. However, once he knows the command, you should give the reward intermittently, as this makes the behaviour more consistent.

Once the dog is consistently responding correctly to your command in a quiet environment, you should present the stimulus that causes the unwanted behaviour at a **low** intensity. For example, if your dog jumps up on visitors, have a friend walk up to the front door, and stand quietly without knocking. Just as the dog reacts to the person, blow a whistle to get his attention and give him the command you have chosen – when he goes to his bed, immediately reward him. When you start this new stage of training, you will want to reward every correct response for the first little while, before going back to intermittent rewards.

Gradually increase the intensity of the eliciting stimulus – have people approach the door, ring the bell and enter. If the dog fails to obey you at any stage, return to the previous level and concentrate on training at that level of stimulus intensity until the dog is responding correctly, every time, before progressing to the next stage.

You should initially start out with food rewards, but if you say “Good Boy” each time before you give the food reward, the voice praise will eventually become a reward in itself. This is useful because it is easy, can be used in a variety of situations and works even as a distraction. Voice praise may be used every time the dog performs correctly.

Once you start training, the dog should never be allowed to perform the unwanted behaviour again. The dog that jumps up could be confined in a room or crate when company arrives, or put out in the yard. The dog that urinates when you greet it could immediately be let out of the house (before you go in) and ignored until calmer. Training will progress much quicker if the dog’s opportunity to perform the unwanted behaviour is eliminated.

Much unwanted behaviour is inadvertently rewarded by the owners. This happens when you give the dog something he wants or values while he is performing the unwanted behaviour. For example, yelling at the dog when he barks, petting him when he chews himself, or letting him in when he scratches the door all teach the dog that he gets something he wants when he performs the behaviour. It is therefore essential that you totally ignore the dog when he is performing the unwanted behaviour. Any time you ignore a learned behaviour, it will initially increase in frequency and intensity, but eventually the dog will stop using it as a way to get what he wants. Remember that some attention, even if it’s yelling or spanking, is better than no attention. To your dog, your attention is the most important thing there is.

Although we are here to give you all the advice and moral support we can, you are the ones who must train your dog. We are here to help in whatever way we can, so please call (519) 823-8800, extension 4041, if you have any problems or questions. If you have a touch-tone phone, you can avoid the university operator by calling (519) 824-4747 and entering extension 4041 at the appropriate time. Once you start training, please call at least every 2 weeks to let us know how you are getting along.