

Behavior Stress Response – Environment Management Beware of Good Enough! You get what you Reinforce!

Most often while training our pups/dogs we get what we reinforce, not what we want! Understanding that DOG SPEAK is a different language than ENGLISH is relevant in increasing our awareness of training skills, body language, in particular stress responses.

Dogs cannot learn when overly stressed. Neither can we. We go into fight or flight response. Until we breath and calm the hormones (adrenaline, cortisol ...) we have a difficult time comprehending what to do next. So do dogs, especially puppies.

Educational enrichment is available online, in books and with knowledgeable trainers/behaviorists. It is fun to learn. In doing so, we learn about ourselves. It helps with our everyday balance, relationship, awareness, and well-being. We become better humans with more empathy towards other species / cultures.

- Readily available stress marker / awareness allows us to promptly evaluate the immediate reaction / response to environment changes.

Here are some of the responses that we share with our dogs when faced with unfamiliar situations.

- Fight (proactive behavior, aggression possible)
- Flight (reactive response, escaping, hiding)
- Freeze (immobility, stiffness, false “calm behavior”)
 - Sympathetic vs parasympathetic predominance (nervous system)
- Fidget (fainting, displacement behaviors like freezing, sniffing too much not for pleasure)

Matching Law

All behaviors are reinforced to a degree given time / skill / how / when / where / what for? If something isn't working, change YOUR behavior first. The pup/dog already has enough overload/stress to deal with.

Awareness / Focus / Attention

Being aware of our and our dog's environment (surroundings) can help us focus on getting and redirecting their attention to a more appropriate, perhaps safer, behavior like SIT. Be mindful increase distance between the SPOOKY stuff (stimulus), that is causing a reaction in your dog. Bringing them closer will only create more stress – the dog will not learn or become confident.

Instead, explore, observe, and plan calmer walks, teaching in quieter areas, then slowly increase this in distance and distraction. Example: Practice in your driveway, back yard, or go to a quiet park at the right time of day. Walk much further away of school buses and children. Teach a reliable SIT before increasing.

Environmental Management

The environment is powerful. It can be empowering or scary. It is our choice and our dogs. Especially puppies should not be forced into unfamiliar situations. That is flooding. Rather, bring them to the Vet's for a treat. Introduce them to a variety of sights, sounds, and smells calmly.

Good breeders do this using "puppy culture" desensitizing pups to much of this before they journey to their new families at 8 – 10 weeks. Here are some tips:

- Enrichment activities (games, agility, walks, finding their treats).
- Leash walks, non-peak times, and routes.
- Structural fence preferable in the back yard, not front (no to invisible fencing).
- No free access to front yard – this can only create fear or reactivity to anyone/thing that can enter the yard.
- Baby gates.
- Confine when guests are present until you know your dog can acclimate to this calmly.
- Limit access to guarded items especially w/p supervision (toys, food).
- Limit access to high arousal situations (too close to buses, children, parks).
- Active supervision while engaging with children.
- Remove access to front windows – open doors.
- Crate or no crate in separation anxiety? Depends. Confinement may help anxious dogs from getting into trouble & becoming stressed when we get home.
- Daycare pet sitter for separation anxiety – NOT – play groups at a facility.
- Seek professional advice from a trainer / behaviorist to clarify and help with a plan.

Spatial Bubble

We all have them! Here are helpful tips on distances that most dogs appreciate us knowing about.

- Intimate distance is 6 – 18 inches (hugging, whispering, touching)
- Personal distance is 1.5 – 4 feet (family members, close friends)
- Social distance is 4 to 12 feet (acquaintances, coworkers)
- Public distance is 12 to 25 feet (public speaking)

This gives you an approximate idea of spatial respect. For dogs, this can vary as they become more confident. Using a leash, tether, and making people AWARE that not all dogs want to

engage until they are ready. Some dogs can NEVER engage comfortably. All interactions require supervision and management.

Observe the dog's body language – not YOUR feeling about the situation. We want our dogs to enjoy people and children. Not all do. Some are fearful. Fear can cause aggression. Set your “individual” dog up for success by knowing what they are comfortable doing in unfamiliar situations and with unfamiliar people.

Introductions Dog-to-Dog – Avoid Canine Conflict

- Plan ahead (crate, baby gates, teamwork, prevention, management, schedules/structure).
- Choose a neutral area preferably fenced or keep on a tether.
- Allow pup/dog to sniff. It helps them relax. Bringing home a pup, have another dog? Allow the OTHER dog to sniff a towel with puppy scent. Be calm.
- Interactions should be short and sweet. Call them back to you, or calmly go to them, hook up and walk away. Do it again after breathing.
- Allow dogs walk and sniff in open areas – everything ok? Great! If not, call back.
- No back seats together unless in crates.
- Put away HIGH VALUE resources (toys, food, treats).
- Keep it light, calm, short sessions.
- Short sessions should be no more than 3-minutes.
- Do not allow the feeling of stress or competition. This can turn into conflict.
- Observe negative emotional patterns, your and the dogs. Yelling, scolding, especially the older dog will not work.
- Keep food bowls on counters – using feeding time to teach a SIT. Mantra: You do something for me, and I'll do something for you. The older dog will enjoy the newness.
- Feed them apart if necessary. No pup or dog should be asked to be stressed out for feeding.
- Create a positive association between the dogs – getting them to work in harmony.
- Safety always comes first. Supervise, guide, teach, and avoid canine conflict.
- Multi-dog households can be conflict free – but each dog needs individual time and age/ability appropriate training.
- Dogs need individual and together time just as children/teens do.
- Do no CHASE DOGS and supervise children to not chase them either. Create games and have the dog find you or hidden objects instead.

Dogs are part of the family, but they have rules, emotions, and behaviors, just like we do. We want our dogs to be happy, healthy, and confident in a variety of situations. If they not, then we need to respect and protect their individuality. Pup and dogs can learn self-control and through association with us teacher, they realize that sharing can be beneficial. Make the association a positive one by teaching and supervising.

Got Behavioral Issues – We all do!

Puppies are a clean slate. Adopted dogs may have baggage. Best advice, plan and focus on goals you and the dog can achieve.

I have discovered from many years of coaching families and individuals (dog behavior) that generally what we think is the issue is only the tip of the iceberg. I focus on information gathering and management the environment. Safety is number one, and not just for the humans, for the dogs too.

We can reshape behaviors in our dogs as long we reshape our own patterns / behaviors. Change needs to be fair and achievable. If a family loves their dog and is committed, with dedicated, to make the living environment less stressful for the dog, much can be achieved. It takes time.

For example, dogs rehomed need time to destress. Pups who join us at 8-weeks need time to transition. Often, we think that because a pup is quiet, they are so well-behaved for 8-weeks. They are scared and not familiar, so they freeze. That is different. Allow them the space and time to adjust.

Good rule of thought: If we change nothing, nothing will happen! Think of making a pot of stew. We to change the flavor BUT put the same ingredients into the pot, same heat, same everything. We will be disappointed when it tastes the same OR maybe not. Maybe this is what we prefer. Know this:

- There are dog factors, human factors, neighborhood factors, household factors and other factors. Control the controllable or ultimately fail at all of it.
- Good enough is not enough – if your dog and you are miserable.
- Start change at a point of success – this is true of teaching dogs, children or adults.
- No bubble gum in the cracks thinking the behavior will go away. Brick & Mortar.
- Learners need a calm environment – so change the patterns.
- Intervene sooner rather than later.
- Reinforce the behaviors desire as often as possible.
- Keeps excitement under, not over threshold by observing, listening, focusing with awareness.

In summary, this is only a brief guide to behavior, stressors, and environmental management. You can integrate teaching so easily by feeding your dog(s) twice a day with FOCUS. If you feed 2X a day, you have 14X training opportunities to teach watch-me, sit, down, stay, come, gentle and isn't it fun to get extra treats when you sit calmly beside the other dog?

Enjoy the Journey!