

COUNTERCONDITIONING

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Counterconditioning is a training technique that is used when you want to replace an unwanted behavior with one which you 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 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 behavior 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 behavior before you open the door, or before the dog gets too excited.

You must also determine what alternate behavior you want to train the dog to perform. This can be anything that you want; however, it must be **incompatible** with the behavior 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 situations would still allow it to roll over and urinate. Most people find that the most acceptable alternate behavior 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 alternate behavior on command. Training should be done in a situation unrelated to one in which the unwanted behavior occurs. Plan to train for 10-15 minutes twice a day, with the sessions separated by at least four hours. 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 just 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 go to his bed with the food reward visible in your hands. When the dog follows you to his bed (even if he just stands on it) reward him immediately (within 1/2 second) with a piece of cheese. Once he responds to the command and reliably, 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 behavior more consistent.

Once the dog is consistently responding correctly to your command in a quiet environment, you should present the stimulus which causes the unwanted behavior 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 Dog" 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 at a distance. 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 behavior 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 behavior is eliminated.

Much unwanted behavior is inadvertently rewarded by the owners. This happens when you give the dog something he wants or values while he is performing the unwanted behavior. 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 behavior. It is therefore essential that you **totally ignore** the dog when he is performing the unwanted behavior. Any time you ignore a learned behavior, 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 is yelling or spanking, is better than no attention. To your dog, your attention is the most important thing there is.