Teaching Dogs to be Calm and Attentive

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Training Fundamentals

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Handlers, especially clients that pay us an hourly rate, are happy when they can do a large part of the work on their own with a hand-out guiding them. The behavior they have taught the dog during the hour should be used as a starting point for other learning. For example, to desensitize the dog to touch and handling, or to desensitize and counter-condition the dog to strange dogs or people.

Lilian Akin, CPDT and I have been using the Calm and Attentive Protocol with dogs that are training challenges through free pit bull training seminars that we give in conjunction with Hellobully (www.hellobully.com). We have also used this protocol in our private practices and in working with dogs at shelters in Pittsburgh. The protocol starts from the point of the dog earning rewards for not doing anything wrong. In Click to Calm, Emma Parsons (2004) clicked her Golden Retriever for breathing (which meant he was not barking at another dog.) The idea is that the dog could be clicked, praised, and rewarded for not barking (breathing), not moving and looking at the handler. If the dog is not doing anything wrong, he is doing something right. It seems simple, but this point is important for dogs and handlers to experience some success quickly.

By the time the handler has worked through barking, coursing around at the end of the leash, and scanning the environment to develop a dog that is still and attentive, the dog has had a good reward history. The dog is more prone to be attracted to the handler than to the environment. Food and praise have trumped the “goings on” in rest of the world.

With the “training challenge” dogs we can capture or shape behaviors that we like more easily than we can command the dogs to execute behaviors. Also, a dog choosing to exhibit a behavior without prompting makes positive training even more appealing to the handlers.

Most dogs will sit eventually, but raising the criteria for a reward from attention to sit is problematic for the “training challenge” dogs. These dogs simply stop working or exhibit dangerous behaviors when they get frustrated. Many Golden Retrievers, pit bulls, cattle dogs, and German Shepherd Dogs have gripped our clothes and arms. Simply ignoring this gripping does not stop the behavior—often the gripping gets more frenzied.

When the handler raises the criteria the dog needs lots of information. Simply clicking/treating for attention then standing there looking at the dog (or worse yet ignoring the dog!) until it does something else can be dangerous. In Excel-erated Learning Pamela Reid (1996) discusses using a secondary reinforcer to indicate that the dog is on the right track. By withholding the click/food reward until the dog meets the new criteria while at the same time praising the dog while it continues to pay attention, these dangerous “frustration bursts” can be reduced. Praise for remaining attentive keeps the dogs focused on the handlers, reduces outbursts, and eventually the dogs sit and earn a jackpot of praise and rewards.

After three 10-reward practice [continued on next page]
sessions of sit, we change the criteria to lying down. The same process is repeated, i.e. the dog is praised for attention and sitting but receives no food. Click/treat is only delivered for lying down. Down is the final behavior in the calming protocol and other training builds on it.

The Calm and Attentive Protocol

The Setup

1. Work on-leash in a quiet room without other dogs present. If this is not possible, move the dog as far away from other dogs as you can. Distractions will cause the process to take longer.

2. Have on hand at least three different high value food rewards to use as primary reinforcers. Note that it is often impossible for a trainer to meet with a handler and dog multiple times a day for three to five minute training sessions. Many dogs have worked for one full hour and complete this entire protocol. By using the least delicious food first, as the dog tires and is sated, better rewards will keep the dog’s interest.

3. Stand still and give the dog about three feet of the leash. By standing on the leash or tethering the dog, movement can be minimized.

Rewarding the Cession of a Unwanted Behavior

4. Criteria #1 – Dog stops barking/straining/moving. These unwanted behaviors tend to stop almost at the same time. When the dog stops barking, praise the dog and click and feed him. If the dog is not looking at you, no food should be delivered. Continue with praise for no barking and lack of movement. Deliver food only when the dog turns to face you. We develop two secondary reinforcers here—praise and click—because we want to use them separately later. The click is used as a marker and the praise will be used as a way to encourage the dog to keep going.

5. Count out 10 food rewards. While the dog is standing still and facing you, praise and click/treat. The dog is not getting a jackpot, but instead he is having ten different opportunities to listen to the praise and get a food reward while being still.

6. Release the dog: Free! Hold onto the leash and change positions by taking three large steps in any direction and repeat from step three.

7. Change position once more and repeat steps three through six.

Changing the Criteria

8. Criteria #2 – Dog sits and is attentive. By now the dog has learned that it can earn reinforcement by being still and looking at you, the handler. The dog has earned at least 30 rewards for this behavior. With this reward history you can continue to praise the dog for being still and paying attention which encourages the dog. Withhold the click and food rewards until the dog sits.

9. When the dog sits, click and treat him with a better food reward. You are now giving the primary reinforcer for the sit, and not for the dog simply looking at you anymore. The exception to this rule will be when you start working in exciting situations, e.g. in the presence of other dogs or in high traffic areas of the training center or shelter. Then it may be all the dog can do to look at you!

10. Continue to reward the dog for sitting attentively—click/treat. Deliver 10 food rewards. Change positions and reinforce the dog 10 more times. Change positions one more time and deliver 10 more rewards for sitting attentively.

11. If the dog gets up, do not command him with “sit.” Ideally we want the dog to choose to sit to get you to reward him. Continue to praise him for being still and looking at you until he sits again, then click and feed him.

12. If the dog knows how to sit from previous training experience, this all goes very quickly. However, I have worked dogs that could not sit due to physical injury or that had never learned to sit. Eventually, these dogs lie down completely—click/treat to capture that behavior. Shaping the dog into a sit or a down position by catching them making slight movements in the right direction has worked for the remaining dogs.

The Final Criteria

13. Criteria #3 – Dog lies down and looks at you. After 30 rewards for sitting, change your criteria. Facilitate the dog’s continued participation using praise for attention and sit, but withhold the click/treat until the dog lies down. Reward the dog for lying down using the best food rewards.
Generalizing the Behavior – Shelter Dogs:

1. Working with the dog on leash and rewards in your pocket, expect the dog to be calm in many places around the shelter. When you dog sits praise him, when he lies down give him a food reward or two or three—you are going to vary the number of food rewards you deliver. You want the dog to start understanding that he will get treats for being calm and attentive—he may get many or a few. Vary the amount of time between the treats by 3–10 seconds to build patience.

2. Work in a room with a few dogs. Work in the hallway when it is empty and in the lobby when it is not busy and then when it is. Being busy with people traffic can be more or less exciting than if the lobby is busy with animal traffic. Work in the adoption rooms, and out on the sidewalk both near and far away from the shelter.

Calm and Attentive is the Beginning

For most dogs the Calm and Attentive Protocol is just a starting point. For dogs that are overly excited during greeting we teach them that they can touch the stranger, then they immediately turn back to their handler for a reward as was explained in Long (2008). Dogs that dislike handling are rewarded for remaining calm while their bodies are touched.

Teaching shelter dogs to become calm in order to gain access to what they want dramatically changes their behavior. We train shelter dogs to be calm to gain access to a bowl of treats in the middle of the floor—then the dogs take turns heeling up to the bowl to eat. Our dogs learn they can approach people and dogs after lying down, rather than bouncing, barking, and lunging toward a dog or person. Having a dog become calm is particularly useful for keeping tension as low as possible during meetings with the pets of potential adopters.

References


Sheri Gintner, MS works with the dedicated staff and volunteers at the Western PA Humane Society to improve the adoptability of shelter dogs. Through the WPHS Super 7 Program bully breeds receive dog-friendly obedience training to bring out the best them. Sheri provides at-home training and classes for all breeds through GoodDog! Behavior Training. She can be reached at sherigooddogbehavior.org.