

Teaching the Concept of Threshold to Clients

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“**T**hreshold” is a concept many trainers instinctively understand, however relating this information to clients is a whole different ball game. Whether you are working with a fearful, over-excited, and/or aggressive dog, or a shy puppy, threshold is something that must be understood (and respected) to achieve training results. There are several different facets of threshold which can layer on top of each other that clients should understand. Getting this knowledge to them can be the difference between keeping a dog under threshold or accidentally flooding the dog. Flooding is an outdated technique with disastrous side effects including increased fear, anxiety, avoidance, and/or aggression.

Facets of Understanding Threshold

Proximity: Proximity is the amount of distance between the dog and the stimulus. Usually the closer the stimulus, the lower the threshold, and the more likely the animal will react.

Direction: Direction is the route the stimulus is taking. Usually the more of a forward beeline toward the dog, the lower the threshold and the more likely the animal will react.

Speed: Speed is how fast the stimulus is traveling. For example, a dog I worked with had major issues with joggers. It didn't matter to the dog what direction they were going, only that they were moving fast.

Time: Time is how long the animal can tolerate the stimulus. For example, there are lots of dogs who may like meeting another dog for about three seconds. After that, their threshold is reached and they become reactive. Even generally good natured dogs who like other dogs or people can “have enough” and need a break.

Amount: Amount is how many stimuli are present. A lot of dogs do better with small numbers of stimuli. It would be like seeing a spider in your basement (which would make me scream), versus going to a country cottage with hundreds in the house. Usually the higher the amount of stimuli, the lower the threshold is.

Size: Size is how big or small a stimulus is relative to the dog. I have seen animals react to large things just as much as smaller things (like children or a cat).

Recognizing Threshold

So how do you teach a client to understand when their dog is at threshold? Pay attention to the dog's body language and physical indicators (symptoms) that can be measured like number of barks, how flat against the head the ears get, seconds the dog freezes, etc. These can be a direct indicator of the threshold level. Many traditional trainers concentrate on removing symptoms (like punishing barking or growling), however removing symptoms

or specific body language will not help the underlying problem, and can give clients a sense of false progress. We have all heard of the dog that bit someone “out of nowhere, without any warning.” In fact, some of these dogs could have been “trained” not to warn. Symptoms generally go away during the training process when the underlying issue is addressed. They are crucial indicators to deal with the real problem but not the focus of the behavior plan.

A good way to explain this to clients is: If you're scared of spiders and I come up to you with a Tarantula you might scream. If I punish your vocal protest, you may learn not to scream around spiders (when I am around), but the overall issue of the fear of spiders did not get any better. In fact, you may hate them even more.

Another important element of threshold to explain to clients is that it doesn't only have to do with dealing with a reactive or fearful dog. I once received a phone call from a Sheltie breeder in Ohio about a puppy she placed in my area. This puppy turned into a fearful dog because of pushing socialization over the pup's threshold. This puppy was sweet but shy and the person who owned this dog thought socialization was exposure—not exposure with a pleasant consequence from the puppy's point of view. So what happened? She passed her puppy off to about 200 different people to pet him. So imagine if you are this puppy, and you're not sure if you like people. You are forced to interact with 200 people. Keeping this puppy under threshold by rewarding the process of walking up to someone, one at a time, for brief periods of time, would have created a confident feeling of security with people. The puppy could have then learned people could offer great things. This puppy, however, didn't want treats from people. Why? Would you want a twenty dollar bill from a giant Tarantula after being forced to approach it, be held by it, and be pet by it over and over again?

Conveying to clients exactly what breaks down into what we consider “threshold” can make the difference in your training. Educate your clients on threshold aspects, and teach them they can layer on top of each other like straws. When clients recognize the dog's stress and anxiety levels, they are far less likely to push their dog over the reaction zone we call threshold. This could be the difference between overcoming fear, or creating more of it.

Jules Nye CPDT-KA, KPACTP has owned Sit Stay & Play in Severn, MD since 2003. Throughout her career she thanks her dogs the most for educating her about behavior, especially Juno her Mastiff/Shepard mix. He taught her so much about fear, anxiety, and aggression issues. Through the hardships with Juno, Jules truly understands how challenging training and owning a reactive dog can be. You can contact her at info@sitstayandplay.com.