**Classical Conditioning**

Whereas eight-week-old puppies are universally accepting of people, adolescent dogs naturally become wary of anything unfamiliar, including noises, objects, dogs, people and places. It is not uncommon for adolescent dogs to become fearful or reactive. As puppies grow older, the world becomes a scarier place. To prevent dogs from becoming wary of children, men, strangers, skateboarders, other dogs, loud noises, vacuum cleaners, nail clippers, collar grabs, etc. etc. etc., take your time when exposing your puppy, adolescent, or newly adopted adult dog to novel (unfamiliar) stimuli, settings and situations and make sure you classically condition your dog not only to tolerate, but also to thoroughly enjoy all of these potentially scary stimuli.

Simply put, classical conditioning helps your dog form positive associations with all sorts of stimuli. Let’s say your puppy has grown to be scared of men. Rather than feeding your dog in a bowl, use his entire allotment of kibble for classical conditioning. For one week, take your dog to dine downtown. Sit on a bench and offer him a piece of dinner kibble each time a man walks by. For a second week, ask male passersby, “Excuse me, would you mind hand-feeding my dog? He’s really shy of men.” In no time at all, your dog will form a positive association between men and FOOD and might muse, “Ah yes, I love men.”

The most important times to classically condition your dog are when visitors come to your house, on walks, in dog parks and especially during dog training classes.

From puppyhood onwards, have every visitor to your house offer your dog a few pieces of kibble. Even though your puppy may be Mr. Sociable right now, unless you take this precaution, he will most certainly become more standoffish, asocial, and maybe antisocial as he grows older. Please do not take your puppies golden demeanor for granted. Have every household visitor offer a food treat to your puppy/dog and then your dog will look forward to visitors. Additionally, teach each visitor how to use the treat to teach your dog to come, sit and stay.

Most people walk their dogs too quickly through the environment. There is simply too much for the dog to take in — people, other dogs, other animals, noises and smells — “Oh there’s a squirrel. I smell Trixie. Hmm! I just love the smell of her urine. Trixie! Trixie! Trixie! Son of a female dog! That motorcycle was soooooo loud! Oh, oh, oh! Cat poo! Woo hoo! Yes!!! And another squirrel. Two squirrels Oh what’s my owner saying now? Oh, S.O.A.F.D! There’s Bruno. OH he’s HUGE! And his owner looks nervous. Why’s my owner jerking my leash? Is that a discarded hamburger wrapping. There’s a cat. I know there’s a cat. Can’t see it. Can’t hear it. Can’t smell it, but I know it’s there somewhere. I can feel it. She’s looking at me. Where is she? Oh NO! Children! I hope they don’t come this way. Another squirrel. Is that the mail truck three blocks away? I hope I get back home before he come.” And so it goes on. The dog’s brain goes into sensory overload. The dog is over-stimulated and instead of paying attention to his owner he becomes hyperactive or reactive.

When walking a dog, on-leash or off-leash, stop every 25 yards, let the dog take his time to look, listen and sniff and wait until he establishes eye contact (acknowledges your presence) and accepts a couple of pieces of kibble before saying “Let’s go” and continuing the walk for another 25 yards. Every couple of hundred yards, find a comfortable place to sit and wait for your dog to settle down and get used to the new environment. Offer your dog a piece of kibble every time the environment changes, for example, each time a person passes by, and maybe two pieces of kibble for a man, a piece of freeze-dried liver for a boy, and three pieces of liver for a boy on a skateboard.

When dogs visit unfamiliar environments, offering then kibble is a great temperament test for trainers, veterinarians and owners to check that the dog is at ease. If the dog refuses kibble from the owner, he is probably anxious about the environment — so give him time to adapt. However, if the dog accepts kibble from his owner but not from his veterinarian or trainer, then the dog most probably feels ill at ease with the veterinarian or trainer and so, proceed slowly — verrrry slowly.

For an adolescent or young adult dog, dog parks and training classes can be pretty scary environments, usually with a high-voltage social scene. Always give the dog a chance to relax and get used to the environment. Before attempting to train, wait until the dog settles down and appears and ease. Periodically keep offering pieces of kibble. Once the dog feels at ease, he will take the kibble and start to pay attention. Keep offering the kibble regardless of the dog’s behavior; it doesn’t matter whether the dog is hiding and peeking, barking, growling, or snapping and lunging. Keep offering the kibble so that the dog eventually forms positive associations with the class setting, the other dogs, the trainer, and other people.

Some people are afraid that offering kibble during classical conditioning might unintentionally reinforce bad behaviors. Certainly, when training, we are always classically conditioning and operantly conditioning at the same time. If you use your voice when classically conditioning, “There’s a good boy, it’s OK,” you might unintentionally reinforce all sorts of unwanted behavior. The classical conditioning still works for us but the operant conditioning works against us and makes the problem worse. In time, the dog will begin to feel OK about the situation but will continue barking and growling, or hiding and shaking, because that’s what he’s been unintentionally trained to do. However, by using food when classically conditioning, you can only reinforce good behavior because a dog cannot bark and lunge or eyeball another dog at the same time as turning to face you to take food.

For example, let’s say we are trying to classically condition a dog that is barking and lunging at another dog. We offer food, but the dog ignores our offerings and continues barking and lunging. Eventually though, the dog barks himself out and sniffs the food, whereupon he turns away from the other dog to take the food. Taking the food does not reinforce the dog’s barking and lunging. On the contrary, the food reinforces the dog for stopping barking and lunging, for turning away from the other dog and for turning towards his owner. After a couple of dozen repetitions, the dog will begin to form positive associations with the sight of other dogs. “I love it when other dogs approach because then my owner feeds me dinner.” And as a bonus, the dog’s trained response to seeing another dog is to turn away from the dog and to sit quietly and expectantly facing his owner.

As classical conditioning proceeds, the dog is less and less inclined to react in a negative manner towards the scary stimulus. Once a dog forms positive associations with stimuli, such as a vacuum cleaner, other dogs, or people, he doesn’t want to growl or snap and lunge at them.

You simply cannot do too much classical conditioning. Remember…

Operant Conditioning Rocks! But…  
Classical Conditioning Rules!