

Help for Reactive Dogs: Petey the Peke (2.)

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Help for Reactive Dogs, Petey the Peke, part 2.

Using Classical Conditioning for Systematic Desensitization

(See Help for Reactive Dogs: Petey the Peke, part 1.)

From Classical Conditioning to Operant

It is the dog's response in a given setting that indicates to owner that *magic moment* when we mentally switch from classical conditioning (Bar's Open -- free food hand fed to the dog) for desensitization work to operant conditioning (giving a food treat as reward for the behavior the dog just performed) . I see it that way.

Recall the example I gave of Petey the fear-reactive Pekingese/mix, within a day or two of my accepting him for foster care, on his first visit to the vet clinic. First, I carried him in there in a portable dog crate, and then took him out of the crate after we got into the examination room. He was one ferocious monster, 9# bundle of fur and teeth. Things were progressing passably well, until it was time for ear exam and nail clipping. I suggested, "I think this dog should be muzzled." Vet went to back room to find a tiny muzzle and returned with muzzle and vet tech. For insurance reasons, they have a policy at that small animal hospital that the vet tech, rather than the owner, restrains difficult dogs. The more the dog was restrained, the more he fought the restraint.

I made an appointment for return visit for the dog's second leptospirosis vaccination some 11 days hence. During this interim, I introduced the special treat reward, Mighty Dog Canned Dog Food/ lamb and rice version delivered to him by a plastic spoon. I used it every time I brought the dog inside from the yard. That taste appears to be his favorite thing on earth.

Next vet clinic visit, I took ferocious Petey and a plastic spoon and the Mighty Dog Canned Dog Food, the can opened, but covered with a plastic lid. When we were called, I took him into the examination room, set him up on the table, stood at the head end, smiled sweetly, and started feeding him with the little plastic spoon. During this process, the dog ignored the vet, even permitted a full exam, including the drawing of a blood sample for the heartworm test! How's that!!!

It was purely classical conditioning, feeding the dog some high value treat to defuse its tensions in what otherwise would be a highly stressful situation. Was this dog ready for operant conditioning at the vet clinic that day? No way! Yet, this same dog was ready for me to switch between classical conditioning and operant conditioning in a less stressful situation: at home, on the public sidewalk, when it saw another dog or strange people in the distance.

I say it's the dog who determines when we make the change because it is the dog offering the behavior. Here's my take on it. It seems to me that when the dog can glance at the distraction it had feared, watch the distraction for a second or two, or even longer, and then glance back at the owner, and even offer a behavior such as sit at heel position, that's the magic moment for click/treat, for switching to the use of operant conditioning. <click/treat> "Yes. You *earned* this treat. Good for you, dog!"

When he first came to me, Petey used aggressive displays toward friendly strangers who might be 400 feet away!! He was even worse if two people happened to be pleasantly conversing with one another even at a great distance from him.

To begin classical conditioning, one first has to work with the student dog at the social distance from the stimulus at which the dog will be able to relax. 400 feet? No, slightly more than that. That's where we had to begin.

Within a few days, I was able to take him to the American Legion parking lot where we'd have the opportunity to see many people coming, getting out of the cars, paying no attention to him at all, and moving on their way. I used tiny delectable food treats during this phase of the classical conditioning to attempt to help Petey overcome his reactivity. We practiced at least once a day for a few moments, for approximately four weeks.

Thinking back, I remember wondering if Petey would ever be able to change. I should have had more faith. Within four to six weeks time of our practicing for mere seconds each day, he had become quite a different dog.

I still play around with the old reliable Jolly Routine because I'm convinced that owner/handler emotions play a huge role in helping the dog work through its anxieties. So when I first notice some strange, unfamiliar dogs in the distance, I still say very happily, "Oh look, dogs!" That phrase has come to signify an opportunity for the student dog to earn some super-delicious food treats. One of the outcomes has been a happy, pleasurable response.

Now Petey sort of scans the horizon, looking for such opportunities to earn treats. Aha. A lady on the sidewalk down the block is carrying an umbrella over her head. He alerts, and now, all on his own, plops into a foldback down by my side, and then looks up at me to make eye contact. "How about that, Mom? Wasn't that perfect?" And I can now extend the duration of that down.

Last evening I couldn't believe it. Around midnight, I had taken Petey out for his last pit stop before bed, when what to our wondering eyes should appear but a fully opened parachute. Right in front of my house, a small street abuts our main street. A teemager and his father were down that adjacent street, right in the middle of the road, one running across

and down the road, while the other handled some cords he had been untangling. Over and over again, they practiced, to see if the parachute would open correctly with no lines tangled.

Petey stood next to me on loose lead, and then he stood right up on his hind feet to get a better look. I started to hear a little low gr, rumble. It sounded a bit like, "Hmm." As in "Hmmm. That's interesting." <LOL> But he controlled himself and just watched, still keeping the loose lead. I waited for the glance back to me, making eye contact, and then his return to heel position, and a nice tucked-up sit. C/T. "What a good dog!"

Okay, everyone's tired of hearing about Petey. <VBG> I use this example because he was such an extremely vocal, reactive dog. He had an opinion about everything! And he wasn't hesitant to use his teeth to enforce his views on the world. Even a 9-lb. dog could inflict a lot of damage.

Now his view of the world is changing. His experiences outside in the big wide world are opportunities to play the learning game. He's no longer reacting with a startle/then instantly revving up to full aggression. He's having a great time instead.

Working with pet owners, one of the lessons I enjoy the most, and perhaps it is one of our most useful tasks as teachers, is helping the owner to see and feel those moments when the dog first alerts to a strange distraction and then relaxes enough to check in with the owner. Those are magic moments, indeed. These are the moments when we know for certain we may switch from classical conditioning to operant conditioning. That's how it seems to me.

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