



Maplewood Dog Training

353 N Main St – Sharon, MA 02067

781 806 5707

www.maplewooddog.com

The Protocol for Relaxation

by Karen L. Overall, MS, VMD PhD, Dipl. ACVB

This program is the foundation for all other behavior modification programs. Its purpose is to teach the dog to sit and stay while relaxing in a variety of circumstances. The circumstances change from very reassuring ones with you present to potentially more stressful ones when you are absent. The purpose of the program is not to teach the dog to sit; sitting (or lying down, if the dog is more comfortable) is only a tool. The goals of the program are to teach the dog to relax, to defer to you, to enjoy earning a salary for an appropriate, desirable behavior, and to develop, as a foundation, a pattern of behaviors that allow the dog to cooperate with future behavior modification (generally desensitization and counter conditioning). This protocol acts as a foundation for teaching the dog context-specific appropriate behavior. The focus is to teach the dog to rely on you for all the cues as to the appropriateness of its behavior so that it can then learn not to react inappropriately.

About Food Treats

This program uses food treats. Remember, the treats are used as a salary or reward, not as a bribe. If you bribe a problem dog, you are defeated before the start. It is often difficult to work with a problem dog that has learned to manipulate bribes, but there are creative ways - often using the use of head collars - to correct this situation. First, find a food that the dog likes and that it does not usually experience. Suggestions include boiled, slivered chicken or tiny pieces of cheese. Boiled, shredded chicken can be frozen in small portions and defrosted as needed. Individually wrapped slices of cheese can be divided into tiny pieces suitable for behavior modification while still wrapped in plastic, minimizing waste and mess. Consider the following guidelines in choosing a food reward:

1. Foods that are high in protein may help induce changes in brain chemistry that help the dog relax.
2. Dogs should not have chocolate.
3. Some dogs do not do well with treats that contain artificial colors or preservatives
4. Dogs with food allergies or those taking monoamine oxidase inhibitor drugs may have food restrictions (for instance, cheese for dogs taking deprenyl).
5. Dog biscuits generally are not sufficient motivation, but some foods are so desirable that the dog is too stimulated by them to relax - something between these two extremes is preferred.
6. Treats should be tiny (less than half the size of a thumbnail) so that the dog does not get full, fat, or bored.
7. If the dog stops responding for one kind of treat, try another.
8. Do not let treats make up the bulk of the dog's diet; the dog needs its normal, well-balanced ration.

The Reward Process

Rewarding dogs with food treats is an art. Learning to do so correctly helps the dog focus on the exercises and keeps everyone safe. To prevent the dog from lunging for the food, keep the already prepared treats in a little

cup or plastic bag behind your back and keep one treat in the hand used to reward the dog. That hand can then either be kept behind your back so that the dog does not stare at the food or can be moved to your eye so that you can teach the dog to look happy and make eye contact with you. The food treat must be small so that the focus of the dog's attention is not a slab of food but rather your cues. A treat of the correct size can be closed in the palm of the hand by folding the fingers and will not be apparent when held between the thumb and forefingers. When presenting the dog with the treat, bring the hand, with a lightly closed fist, up quickly to the dog (do not startle the dog), and turn your wrist to open your hand.

When starting the program, let the dog smell and taste the reward so that it knows the anticipated reward for the work. If the dog is too terrified to approach, you can place a small mound of the treat on the floor. Then ask the dog to "sit;" if the dog sits instantly, say "Good girl (boy)!" and instantly open your hand to give the dog the treat while saying "stay."

Getting the Dog's Attention

If the dog does not sit instantly, call its name again. As soon as the dog looks at or attends to you, say, "Sit." If the dog will not look at you and pay attention, do not continue to say, "Sit." If you continue to give a command that you cannot reinforce, the dog learns to ignore that command. If necessary, use a whistle or make an unusual sound with your lips to get the dog's attention. As soon as the dog looks at you, say, "Sit." Use a cheerful voice. Some people may have to soften or lower their voices almost to a whisper to get the dog to pay attention to them. Often this is because they have given all their previous commands to the dog by yelling. The dog has very successfully learned to ignore this.

If the dog is looking at you but not sitting, approach the dog to close the distance, raise the treat gently to your eyes, and request "sit." Often just moving toward a dog helps the dog sit. Not only have you decreased the distance, you appear taller and to be over the dog; such behaviors are used in canine communication to get the lower (in relative elevation) dog to obey the desires of the higher one. You can use these innate dog behaviors as long as you are careful. Never back up a dog that is growling. Never corner a fearful dog. Never continue to approach a dog that acts more aggressively the closer you come. Remember, the point of the program is to teach the dog to relax and look to you for cues about the appropriateness of its behavior. The dog cannot do this if upset.

If the dog still will not sit, consider using a head collar. By using a long-distance lead you can request that the dog "sit" and gently enforce this from a distance by pulling on the lead. Reward with a treat as soon as the dog sits.

Cautionary Note

If your dog is aggressive or if you are concerned about approaching it, do not do any of these exercises off-lead until the dog is perfect on-lead. Fit the dog with a head collar and work with the dog only on a lead at the outset. The halter allows you to close the dog's mouth if the dog begins to be aggressive. This is an ideal correction because it meets the rule that psychologists have established for ideal "punishment": you have interrupted the dog's inappropriate behavior within the first few seconds of the beginning of the behavior so that the dog can learn from the experience. Be gentle but consistent. Taking your anger or fear out on the dog will only worsen the behavior. As soon as the dog responds to the halter and calmly sits, reward the dog and continue. Never reward a dog that is growling, lunging, barking, shaking, or urinating.

After the dog sits for the first time you are ready to begin the program. Remember the following guidelines:

1. Use the dog's name to get the dog to orient toward you and to pay attention. If this does not work, use a whistle or a sound to which the dog is not accustomed.
2. Once the dog is paying attention to you, say "sit" and give the dog 3 to 5 seconds to respond. If the dog does sit, reward it instantly; if not, repeat the "sit" command in the same calm, cheerful voice. You may want to experiment with voices to see the tonal qualities to which your dog best responds.
3. Do not worry about using the dog's name frequently or about repeating the commands if the dog responds. This is not obedience class, but if you later wish to take the dog to obedience class, the dog will do well if it did well on these programs. Making the adjustment will not be a problem.
4. Do not chase the dog around the room to try to get it to comply with you. If necessary, choose a small room with minimal distractions and use a leash. A head collar provides even more instantaneous response. Use head halters and other collars kindly.

A sample sequence could look like this:

"Bonnie - sit - (3-second pause) - sit - (3-second pause) - Bonnie, sit - (move closer to the dog and move the treat to your eye) - sit - (Bonnie sits) - good girl! (treat) - stay - good girl - stay (take a step backward while saying "stay" - then stop) - stay Bonnie - good girl - stay (returning while saying "stay" - then stop) - stay Bonnie - good girl! (treat) - okay (the releaser and Bonnie can get up)!" - Bonnie happily gets up and watches calmly for your next signal.)

Note that you talk nonstop to the dog during these programs. This type of talking is not allowed in obedience classes but is desperately needed with inexperienced puppies and problem dogs. These dogs need all the cues that they can get. They need the constant guidance and reassurance of hearing your voice with clear instructions. These instructions and reassurances should occur in the context of shaping or gradually guiding their behavior toward more appropriate behaviors. You will have to learn to read subtle cues that your dog is giving and use these to your advantage. You will find it easier than you believe. The one thing that you absolutely cannot do is to talk a continuous stream to the dog without receiving the context-appropriate responses to your requests. If you rush through everything, you will only stress the dog and teach it to ignore everything you say. This is not good. A corollary of this admonition is that it is necessary to use consistent terminology and brief phrases and to do so in an environment when no one else is carrying on long, loud, distracting conversations.

Avoiding Problems

Do not push or pull on your dog or tug on its collar to get the dog to sit. These types of behaviors can be viewed as challenges by some dogs and may make them potentially dangerous. Use the methods discussed in the Protocol for Deference. If you really believe that the dog needs some physical help in sitting, use a head collar.

Do not wave your hands or the treat around in front of the dog. Part of the point of this program is to make the dog calmer and less confused. Excitable behavior on your part or unclear signals can make your dog more anxious. This does not help.

It is important to be calm. Your dog will make mistakes. This does not reflect on you. Problem dogs and new puppies require a lot of patience. The people who have had the most success with these protocols have been those who work the hardest and most consistently.

Do not let your dog be a jack-in-the-box. You must control the situation, and you must achieve that control by convincing the dog to defer to you. If the dog gets up to get the treat every time it is offered, the dog controls

the situation. When the dog does this, consider whether you were too far away from the dog when you offered the treat. If so, move closer. Ideally, the dog should be able to get the treat just by stretching its neck. The dog should not need to get up. If you have a small dog, this may mean that you need to squat down to offer the reward. Be careful if the dog is aggressive because your face is now close to the dog. If you are close enough for the dog to do the exercise properly and the dog still gets up, close your hand over the treat and say "No." One advantage of holding the treat in this manner is that you can safely deny the dog the treat at the last second if the dog acts inappropriately. Then ask the dog to sit again. After the dog sits, say "Stay," wait 3 to 5 seconds, say "stay" again, and then give the treat. The two "stays" with the period between them will reinforce the dog that it cannot get up when it wants to - the dog must be released. By asking the dog to stay twice, you are telling it that whenever it makes a mistake, it must do two things to recover from it. A sample sequence follows:

"Susie - sit - (3 to 5- second pause) - sit - (Susie sits) - good girl! - stay(start to give treat and dog gets up) - no! - (close hand over treat) - sit - (Susie sits) - stay - (3 to 5-second pause) - stay - good girl - stay - good girl! - stay (give treat) - okay!" (Dog is now allowed to get up and does so.)

Do not tell the dog that it is good if it is not. Do not reward shaking, growling, whining, or any other behavior that may be a component of the behavior you are trying to correct. If the dog gets impatient and barks for attention, say "No! Quiet! - stay - good girl - stay - good girl - (treat) - stay..." If a vocal command is not sufficient to quiet the dog, remember that a head collar can be pulled forward to close the mouth and abort the bark before it starts, so that your correction is the most appropriate possible.

Finally, if you accidentally drop a food treat and the dog gets up to get it, do not correct the dog (the dog did not make the mistake and you did not deliberately drop the treat). Just start at the last point.