



Prince George Veterinary Hospital
3827 18th Avenue
Prince George, BC
V2N 1B1
Phone: (250) 563-1541
Fax: (778) 309-7925
www.princegeorgevet.ca
info@princegeorgevet.ca



Rescue Counterconditioning

For some animals, there are particular things in the world that they find especially upsetting. These might be strangers at the door, loud noises, other animals or any number of other things. We call these things “triggers”. An animal may respond to its trigger by showing aggressive behaviour (barking, lunging, growling etc), by becoming fearful (hiding, cowering, barking etc) or even just being happy and over-excited (barking, bouncing, charging trigger etc). While this type of behaviour can be stressful and frustrating, there are training techniques to help animals become more comfortable with their triggers. Desensitization and counterconditioning are two techniques that gradually get an animal to become more comfortable to their triggers by exposing them under controlled and positive circumstances.

However, we cannot always predict or control when these triggers will appear. The technique that will be described here is called rescue counterconditioning and it can be used when you and your animal find yourselves surprised by a trigger. This training is not about rewarding good behaviour (you will reward regardless of how the animal behaves when the trigger is present) but is instead about teaching the animal that the trigger actually predicts a positive reward.

- This may feel like you are rewarding the bad behaviour. You are not. Instead, you are changing the animal’s underlying emotional reaction to the trigger, from negative (fearful, anxious), to positive (anticipating a reward). You are teaching them that the trigger predicts something good.

STEPS

- The first thing to do is to make a list of the triggers your dog reacts to. Rate each trigger’s intensity (i.e how much does your dog react to it?) from 1-10. Choose one trigger from this list to start. Often it is easier to start with a less-reactive trigger.
- Next, identify what rewards your dog is willing to work for. Most often, this is tasty food but it can also be access to certain toys, play, or attention. Each dog is different. Ideally, this reward should only be used for this particular training. If it is food, make sure it is small enough to give a lot without overfeeding (usually the size of a pea is enough)

- Next choose a “mark”. This is a signal to the animal that we are about to give them the tasty treat. Ideally, the signal should be unique and not easily confused with sounds they could hear outside of training. Examples include saying “Yes”, using a clicker or clacking your tongue.
- Next, we need to “load the marker” which is where we teach the animal what the marker means. We do this by getting the animal’s attention, giving the mark and the treating 1-2 seconds after. It must be after the mark and not during the mark (we want to teach them that the mark PREDICTS a treat). Do this about a dozen times (this will constitute 1 session). Do several sessions a day for the next few days. The animal should now know that the mark means they get their special treat.
- Once you have loaded the mark, you are ready to start counterconditioning. Whenever the trigger you have chosen appears and your animal notices it, begin marking and rewarding. Do not stop until the trigger is gone. Ideally, you should start marking and rewarding as soon as the animal notices the trigger.
 - If your animal is not responding at all to the treats, then the trigger is way too strong or close and you will need to do some traditional desensitization and counterconditioning training to see improvement.
- The purpose is to train the animal that the trigger that previously led to a negative reaction actually predicts a special treat.

This training method is most useful when combined with traditional desensitization and counterconditioning, where we gradually expose an animal to its triggers under controlled circumstances, rewarding them for calm behaviour. Rescue counterconditioning however, is all about handling a situation where you do not have control, to prevent negative associations from being formed. If paired together, it can often create much happier pets that are more comfortable with things that previously upset them.