

Using *Control Unleashed* for Dog-Dog Aggression

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I was introduced to *Control Unleashed* (CU) while taking classes with my own dogs at Y2K9's dog sports club, where author Leslie McDevitt taught for many years. The club now offers CU classes geared, as the book is, primarily toward reducing reactivity and increasing focus in competition dogs. However, in speaking to Y2K9's founder Deb Norman, I realized how these techniques could be applied to my own practice.

As a trainer who primarily provides private, in-home training for clients in center city Philadelphia, the application of the training protocols in CU for my average client is very different from the applications outlined in the book. My clients' dogs are most frequently reactive to very common city stimuli: loud buses, joggers, bicyclists, skateboarders, people with rolling suitcases, and the most common – other dogs! Every time these city dwellers leave their homes they are almost guaranteed to run into something that will provoke a response, sometimes a block or two away, sometimes smack in front of them. The ability to control the environment and remain sub-threshold is non-existent and usually the anxiety of the dog and owner, knowing that a trigger could come around any corner has them on edge for most of the walk. In an ideal world I could set up a “fake city” and maintain appropriate thresholds while eliminating unpredictable events, similar to the way CU classes are run. But unfortunately, even with appropriately set-up training sessions where we work functionally on becoming more and more equipped to deal with city stimuli, the reality is that these dogs live in what can feel like their worst nightmare, and it is impossible to avoid.

Most of my clients' dogs display what Leslie McDevitt refers to as “high-end behaviors” (p 25) such as:

- Hypervigilant scanning
- Hair trigger response to provoking stimuli
- Slow recovery
- Lunging/snarling/barking/growling reactively at stimuli

Many owners don't notice, aren't bothered by, or misdiagnose “low-end” behaviors (p 24), such as sniffing, or showing more interest in environment than in handler, as these behaviors often resemble what people envision as normal leisurely walking behavior.

Not only do we have a set-up that forces the dogs to be flooded with very challenging circumstances, many of the owners have never even done basic training, and do not understand that their dog's behavior is the result of feelings and drives, not just naughty habits they imagine must be “broken.” Many of my clients have tried methods that have been suggested to them, such as

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collar corrections or other punitive measures and have accidentally conditioned an even more intensely negative emotional response. Explaining counterconditioning, desensitization and the importance of the process by which we get our “end result” is the first step in helping bring out the understanding trainer within the owner. I believe it is crucial to help the owner understand why we are going to be using certain protocols, and that even though other methods may seem faster or easier, they are not a true solution. Most owners want their dogs not only to behave well, but also to *feel* well, and once we take the dog's feelings into account, it helps the owners maintain patience and commitment.

Once I think I have my client on board, I try to get a sense for what is feasible for their lifestyle. Are they able to walk their dogs on certain routes where there will be fewer reaction-inducing stimuli? Can they walk during low-activity times of day when there will be less going on? And – this one is really important – is there a way to provide exercise to the dog outside of their city walking? It is so hard to try to promote calm, relaxed behavior from a dog with pent-up energy, but so often the walk, where the dogs are encountering their triggers, is their only source of exercise. I try to work with my clients to help brainstorm about options for exercise that are stress free and fun (for example, I encourage them to use friends' back yards if possible, or to find fenced areas that aren't dog parks and don't have a lot of canine traffic). I want exercise to be a way for the dog to de-stress and work off some built up cortisol.

Once we have established daily routines that set the dog and owner up for success, I select what I believe will be the best training equipment. Gentle leaders and Sense-ation harnesses are among my favorites as I believe they help manage pulling and lunging on leash while we work on teaching the dog to walk on a loose leash. I show the client how to use the new equipment and how to help the dog develop positive associations to it. Often the extra control the owner feels with the new equipment begins to cut down on some of the stress associated with leash-walking.

Hands-On Training

The training protocols described here are done at different rates with each dog depending on their comfort and ability. I have no expectations for how long it will take a dog to grasp any certain exercise; the goal is for the dog to feel confident and comfortable while remaining focused and motivated.

One of the first things I do with my clients' dogs is develop a line of communication by teaching the owner how to mark and reward behaviors [continued on next page]

with a clicker or verbal marker. I usually demonstrate each exercise with the dog if he is comfortable working with me as it helps the clients visualize the process, and also creates a positive relationship between me and the dog.

I begin by clicking any behaviors I like, including:

- Orienting to me
- Eye contact
- Default sit (without a command)

I never ask for or demand behaviors. I make everything easy, beginning by showing the dog that “click happens” and it means yummy food. Once I start seeing the dog begin to repeat the behaviors I am clicking, I will usually use lure-reward to teach something simple like “paw” or “down” so the owner can watch the dog learn a new behavior using clicker training. Again I do not use any commands.

When the dog begins to repeat the behaviors with less luring, I introduce the idea of “default behaviors” (p 70). I then introduce eye contact as one of the most important default or offered behaviors, and we begin to work on “Doggie Zen” (p 90).

1. I hold the treat out of the dogs reach and off to the side of my body (photo 1).
2. If the dog looks at me immediately I click and reward with the treat in my hand.
3. If the dog has a hard time looking away from the food at all I click and reward any slight glance away from the treat, until I can shape the eyes to orient to mine.
4. Once I have the dog offering eye contact reliably, I hold out on the click/reward until I get longer and longer periods of sustained contact (photo 2).
5. Once the dog is offering sustained eye contact I begin to add small distractions and proof the behavior.



Photo 1 - Dog looks at food in hand.



Photo 2 - Dog makes eye contact with handler despite food in clear view.



Photo 3 - Holding the toy out of reach and waiting for the dog to offer eye contact.



Photo 4 - Rewarding eye contact with play.



Photo 5 - End result of the “off-switch” game – default down with sustained eye contact.

I teach my clients to encourage default eye contact and orientation to the handler throughout their regular routines, anytime they are in the presence of something of importance to the dog. I do not associate a cue with eye contact.

Now that the dog understands clicker training and has at least one solid default behavior, I like to begin the “off-switch” game (p 154). Many of my clients do not play tug or fetch with their dogs for various reasons. I want to introduce this type of interaction early on so they can build a rapport around play. I explain how helpful it is to have an object we can control that incites arousal so we can then encourage the dog to think while aroused, and help the dog learn to bring himself out of arousal. I also discuss the benefits in terms of:

- Energy release
- Bonding
- Using motivators other than food

I like to make sure that the dog has a reliable “out” so that the play doesn’t get out of control or frenzied. I work on teaching the dog to drop the toy to trade for food, or I hold the toy still and when the dog finally releases, I reinforce by continuing the game.

Once the dog has a reliable “out,” I begin working on the “off-switch” game.

1. I hold the toy out of reach and out to the side and wait for eye contact (photo 3).
2. I mark and reward eye contact by giving the dog access to the toy and playing (photo 4).
3. Eventually I work towards a default down so that the dog has to do a settling behavior with his body before getting the toy. Ideally I will have a default down with sustained eye contact (photo 5).
4. I then gradually increase how exciting the toy is and how long the dog maintains the default behavior. ➤

Once I feel the clients and dogs are beginning to feel good about working together and are finding some good outlets to release energy, I begin working on one of my favorite impulse-control exercises: "Stay."

1. I begin by introducing the word "stay" and then feeding continuously until I introduce a release word like "OK" and then encourage the dog to move.
2. I gradually work in small periods of time between reinforcements until I see that the dog is actively waiting for the next treat.
3. I begin to work in small distractions like subtle body movements.
4. I explain to the client that reinforcing throughout the stay, and particularly after each small distraction reframes the distractions as opportunities rather than stressors.
5. We then increase the level of distraction gradually.

Once the dog has the concept of waiting politely and being released with a word like "OK," I introduce the idea of "wait at the door," which is an example of McDevitt's concept of "reorienting points" (p 72).

1. I bring the dog to the door on leash and stand as though we are getting ready to go out (photo 6).
2. I wait for a sit and eye contact and then begin to make progress in opening the door.
3. If the dog sees me reach for the door knob and breaks the sit, I go back a step and wait patiently.
4. I repeat this until the dog is able to sit and watch me calmly until the door is open and I release him (photo 7).
5. I explain to the client that, if done every single time, this will become an environmental cue to the dog and it will happen faster each time, as the dog comes to believe it is the only way to make the door open. I explain that, if the dog is out of control just entering

the outside environment, it will be harder for him to come back to active thinking while outside. The wait at the door sets the tone for the whole walk.

6. Once we are outside and the door is closed, I again wait until the dog orients to me, or a small approximation in my general direction, and then I click and reward (photo 8).

The beginning of our work outside the home is usually when I introduce the concept of the Premack principle. So often, people think that the best way to train a dog is to take a "zero tolerance" approach to any unwanted behavior. I explain that not only is this not feasible, it's also very discouraging to the dog. I encourage my clients to try to celebrate small pieces of the final picture, and then release the dog to do the things he or she is interested in doing.

I usually combine the "give me a break" game (p 148) with our first lesson on loose-leash walking.

I start on a quiet side-street where there is not a lot of action and we have enough room to circle and move about freely.

1. I wait for the dog to orient to me and then click/reward, and then immediately dismiss the dog, saying "OK" and often waving an empty hand to encourage the dog to go ahead and disengage.
2. If the dog stays engaged I continue to reward and release with an "OK."
3. If the dog disengages, I allow him to sniff or explore while I stand still. I do not allow him to pull me. If the dog pulls, I will turn and move the other direction or brace in place so the dog cannot move towards his intended target while pulling. The basic lesson being that "pulling does not work." Then I wait for the next time the dog orients to me, then click and reward again.
4. After I have built up the desire to orient to me and convinced the dog that he will [continued on next page]



Photo 6 - Waiting at the door for dog to offer eye contact.



Photo 7 - Dog is able to sit and offer eye contact while door is open.



Photo 8 - Dog is released from wait, passes through door, and orients to handler.



Photo 9 - Sustained orientation toward the handler while walking on a loose leash.

have opportunities to do what he wants, I begin to build on sustained focus on me, and then transition to maintaining orientation to me while I walk (photo 9).

5. I start by taking a step or two and, if the dog remains focused, click/reward.
6. I gradually build up duration of focusing on me while I walk and offer “breaks” by releasing the dog before he disengages on his own.

I also do a version of this where I walk the entire time and use turning as a way to encourage re-orientation.

1. I walk and, as long as the dog is focused and orienting to me, I click and reward repeatedly.
2. If the dog disengages, I walk in the opposite direction of whatever he is moving towards.
3. When the dog switches directions and is closest to me, even if his intention is just to pass by and keep moving, I capture the moment of closest physical proximity with a click/reward.
4. I repeat this until the dog begins to want to orient to me and then, after small periods of sustained orientation, I dismiss the dog by saying “OK” and allowing him to walk in his desired direction (again, without pulling too hard).

I also focus a lot on leash tension and teach my clients to be aware of it. I prefer six foot leashes instead of four foot so the dog can sniff and move about somewhat freely without constant tension on the leash. I will occasionally put gentle tension on the leash, then click and immediately release tension for any orientation in my direction. I want the dog to learn that leash tension means “get with your person,” and that it is a communication tool, not a punisher or just an unavoidable nuisance.

At this point the client usually gets very excited about the fact that the dog is actually able to walk on a loose leash. I explain that, yes, the dog is capable but he is still learning and will not be able to maintain a loose leash throughout his entire walk; there needs to be a distinction between training time and leisurely walking. I encourage owners to do just a few minutes of “practice” and then to try to put it out of their minds so that they and their dog can enjoy their walk without trying to have a 30-minute training session. I tell them to reward any offered loose-leash walking or eye contact they get, but otherwise just use the equipment to maintain control even though the dog is not actively working.

Once we have a dog who is able to focus on us while outside, I will begin by bringing the provoking stimulus, a neutral dog, into the environment at a distance and begin to gauge thresholds and responses. I usually have the neutral dog lie down or stand still in the beginning in order to keep things as calm as possible. Only as we progress do I begin to move about and maybe even bounce around with my neutral dog. The same goes for any stimulus that is a trigger.

At this stage I explain to the client how to understand thresholds by:

- Reading body language in terms of: muscle tension, posture, pilo-erection, ears, eyes, mouth, breathing, tail carriage, etc.
- Paying attention to the behaviors the dog is displaying: leash tension, lunging, vocalization, staring, avoidance, etc.
- Assessing whether or not the dog is able to be responsive to the handler.

We keep the dog sub-threshold while we work together and reinforce responsiveness and orientation to the handler while in the presence of the other dog. We also discuss what to do when real life happens and all of a sudden the dog and handler find themselves in a situation where the dog is over threshold:

- Immediately increase distance by moving away if possible.
- Put yourself in between the dog and the stimulus.
- Block the dog’s view with a parked car, mailbox, etc.
- And, most importantly, use distracters. Toss treats on the ground for the dog to hunt for, or use a squeeze tube of peanut butter or something to, as McDevitt says, “gum up the dog’s mouth,” (p 140) that will help orient them right away from the stimulus.

The book *Civilizing the City Dog* by Pam Dennison and Jolanta Benal also offers some good ideas and options for what to do when you find yourself in a sticky city situation.

The exercises I have outlined so far help to bring the dog and owner to a point where they are ready to leave home and walk through the city. Often the mindfulness, feedback, and positive reinforcement are enough to change the way the dog feels about the entire walk, and as long as these protocols stay in place, the dog feels increasingly comfortable and confident with his training exercises and environment, and therefore so does the owner. If everyone is happy and improving then there may not be a need for further training. However, many dogs will still benefit greatly from continuing to counter-condition their emotional response to the mental picture of something like another dog. The “look at that game”(p 122) is my very favorite of all of the protocols in CU, and after the foundation behaviors I have just outlined are solidified, I will begin to teach students how to teach and use this invaluable tool. I will go into more detail about continuing this work in the next issue of *The APDT Chronicle of the Dog*.

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