



Leash Anxiety Workshop – April 27, 2014

By Jeff Coltenback

One of the major factors that contribute to a dog's happiness is walking and travelling with their family (i.e. pack, social group, etc). Dogs thrive when they travel on a daily basis. Of course, many dogs can be very happy and content with being yard dogs. And such dogs may never exhibit behavioral issues. The fact of the matter is that too many dogs do have issues because they are not stimulated enough mentally due to lack of getting out and walking. The cause of not getting out on that leash is obvious; they are uncontrollable on the leash. It is uncomfortable or embarrassing to the owner how their dogs behave in public on leash. If walking isn't fun for the handler, it isn't going to happen. Then the problem will only be worse if the dog is walked again. When I ask owners about their dog's exercise or walking regimen, many times they will begin making excuses or "bargaining" as I like to call it: "He loves the yard more than walking"; "He wants to kill all the squirrels"; "I just can't handle her, she pulls me all over"...you get the idea. So, the dog that wasn't all that good at wearing a leash is now even worse because the dog rarely goes out.

Is there a root cause to all of this? Probably. We just may never be able to isolate why some dogs, regardless of breed, do not do well in social situations. I can take a stab at some likely reasons that could be the culprit of a leash-anxious dog (these could apply to many social scenarios). Puppies being bred and sold, or whatever, are taken away from their mother and litter too early. I don't know who decided that 8 weeks old is a good time for puppies to be taken away from their litter. So many valuable life lessons occur with the litter during that time (and from mom) and really aid pups to become balanced adult dogs. I feel having puppies taken away from litter prematurely is recipe for potential problems later on. Not letting puppies socialize with the world until they get all of their shots is another biggie!! Ok doctor, why not? Why can't I socialize my pup until she gets her shots? "Because you don't want her to get sick do you? Oh no, of course not Doctor: You're right – I will only take her to you; where she will only be surrounded by healthy dogs. There are no sick dogs in the waiting rooms of veterinarians, right? Geez, come one. Really? I get it. I do. I know puppies are more susceptible to disease. But, that advice about isolating puppies until a certain age is a socialization killer. Puppies need to get out and experience as much of the world as possible and be introduced to as many things as possible (i.e. the leash and walking).

Yet another possible root cause for dogs to be leash-anxious could be a traumatic experience when the puppy was very young (got attacked by another dog, slipped down the stairs when going out for the first time, got tangled around something with the leash, etc.). Any negative experience surrounding the leash, especially when a dog is young could have lifetime ramifications. But, it also doesn't mean that we can't fix them. Dogs still need to walk and travel and experience the world. And, you can

work with a dog of any age to modify its behavior. But, when dogs develop leash issues, what do most people do when the encounter problems while out on a walk? They tend to get out of that uncomfortable or embarrassing situation as fast as possible; usually when their dog is acting her worst? For instance, owner is walking their dog and the dog starts going berserk at the sight of another dog – jumping, barking, lunging, etc – and the owner gets their dog out that situation when the dog's behavior is at its peak. They may even try and calm the dog down with a simple pet and say "it's ok...it's ok" in a nice high pitch sweet tone of voice. And, when the stimuli are removed, the dog settles down and the owner just rewarded the behavior. We all know what happens when we praise a dog, right? It reinforces the desired behavior. The problem is that the behavior we are rewarding is the exact behavior we want to be rid of. And, the problem perpetuates itself.

Finally, one last thing to consider is your dog's personal space. All dogs have their own thresholds and personal space. What I mean by this is; that each dog may exhibit his bad behavior at the slightest stimulus received by his senses. One dog may have a personal space as vast as his line of sight, smell or hearing. AS soon as he or she see, hears or smell something they begin to react. Other dogs may have a personal space of 10 feet – when the stimulus gets to within 10 feet of the dog, the dog reacts. We need to determine what our dog's personal space is and work within the parameters of each dog's triggers.

These few paragraphs are just some insights of mine into leash-anxious dogs and some possible causes to such issues. Notice how I did not review how to fix them? The reason being is that every dog and handler and situation is different. What works with one dog may not work with another. However, during this workshop we will go over a few techniques that work with the majority of cases. What we review is generally works for me. It doesn't mean that any other approach is right or wrong, as long as it modifies the behavior to at least a manageable degree. There are many schedules of reinforcement that could modify the behavior of a leash-anxious dog. I'm not going to bore you with fancy psychological terms and scientific studies. My primary objective is to give you some tools to make walking more manageable and to improve your relationship with your dog. The following bullets are some talking points surrounding leash anxiety that will be discussed during the workshop.

Questions and tips for modifying leash anxiety

- **What's the number one reason dogs become anxious, fearful or aggressive on leash?**

The leash itself

- **What's the number two reason dogs become anxious, fearful or aggressive on leash?**

The handler

- **What's the primary reason for this behavior to perpetuate (i.e. what reinforces the behavior)?**

Separation

- **What's the biggest challenge in modifying a dog's anxious state while on leash?**

Opportunity

- **What is your dog's personal space? What is your personal space?**

Be aware of your surroundings

- **What's the first action that needs to take place to modify leash anxiety?**

STOP! Get all stimuli to stop moving (i.e. walking away from stimuli)

- **What are the two primary ingredients needed to begin leash anxiety modification?**

Time and Patience

- **What needs to happen in order for change to occur?**

Ask for help, professional or otherwise

What are some common approaches to leash anxiety?

Unfortunately, there is no “one size fits all approach”. But, here is an overview of a few options at your disposal.

1. Good old positive reinforcement works very well in redirecting your dog’s behavior onto a more appropriate behavior and state of mind. The problem is that your timing in rewarding your dog must not coincide with the dog exhibiting the behavior you are trying to modify. You could inadvertently reward your dog’s behavior, thus perpetuating and even intensifying the problem.
2. Compulsion/correction based training. This old school method can work if it is done correctly and the appropriate behavior is followed up with positive reinforcement. However, too many people implement this protocol with too much force and sometimes even anger and frustration. There are appropriate ways to correct a dog. But, if it not done properly and precisely, the results could be a damaged relationship with your dog.
3. Removing your dog from the stimulus is the most common tactic performed by both dog owners and trainers. This is my biggest pet peeve. Removing your dog from a social experience when it is at the peak of its behavior does one thing, and one thing only; it perpetuates the cycle and validates the behavior. The dog’s actions get it to safety and comfort. This is conditioning in its simplest form. Dog acts a certain way, dog is brought to safety, behavior validated as successful. The behavior will likely perpetuate.

What we will be doing today...

We may utilize any of the above approaches today. However, the focus of today is two-fold: Opportunity and Extinction (my understanding of extinction).

We will be giving the dogs (and handlers) the opportunity to work through their anxieties and allow a more appropriate state of mind to surface. Once the appropriate behavior materializes, we will then reward and/or remove dog from the environment.

REMOVING THE DOG ONLY WHEN IT ABANDONS ITS BEHAVIOR IS THE KEY!

Definition

Extinction is observed in both operantly conditioned and classically conditioned behavior. When operant behavior that has been previously reinforced no longer produces reinforcing consequences the behavior gradually stops occurring.