



## Treat and Retreat

Have you ever seen your dog nervously stretch towards a person in order to take a treat from them or sniff them? Did your dog ever then immediately run away or even bark explosively at the person because he finds himself too close to them? Most dogs have a distance or “safety zone” in which they feel comfortable. For dogs that are uncomfortable with strangers, having that person too close to them can cause panic or even an aggressive response. For some dogs, having strangers give them treats is not the safest way to teach them to be comfortable with new people.

To give you a better idea, let’s say you were afraid of spiders. One day, you come home to find a giant tarantula in the middle of your kitchen! Naturally, you are terrified...and then you see that the tarantula is sitting on a ten-dollar bill. *Of course*, you want the money, but you have to get awfully close to your greatest fear to get it. You decide to be brave and take your chances and reach for the bill. The moment you take it, the spider jumps on you! The spider thinks he is just being friendly, and he has never done anything mean to you before, of course you should like him!

But how do *you* feel? That sudden fight/flight reaction makes more sense now, doesn’t it?

When a stranger has a tasty treat and your dog nervously or reluctantly approaches to take it, a couple of things are happening. First, and most importantly, your dog is pushing himself past his comfort zone because he wants the treat so badly. The second is the problem that occurs when the treat is gone - your dog is suddenly too close to something he genuinely feels is scary and may not know how to react.

You may wonder what it is that makes your dog so afraid of this new person or of people in general. Unfortunately, we may never know due to the simple fact that fear is often irrational. Think of people that are terrified of heights but have never fallen from a high place or people with a phobia of an animal they have never had an interaction with.

Often, our first instinct is to try to make the person less scary by pairing the stranger with treats. Unfortunately, if your dog is too far out of his comfort zone, we are doing more harm than good. No one is going to develop good feelings by doing something scary all the time. Luckily, there is another helpful way to handle this situation – a technique called “Treat & Retreat.”

Treat & Retreat is a method that involves rewarding your dog for being around a stranger using a double reward process- they earn both treats and distance from the stranger. When your dog is scared of a stranger, the thing he wants most is distance away from them. For many dogs, that feeling of *relief* is a much more powerful reward than the treats. By using what he really wants, plus some strategically placed treats, it will allow your dog to approach at his own pace and with confidence.



Let's go back to that scary tarantula. This time, he is all the way across the room in a locked tank surrounded by sticky paper traps so he can't get to you. For every step closer to the tarantula you take, I am going to hand you a hundred-dollar bill.

Now, how do you feel about the situation? A little less concerning, right? Now you're more excited about getting the next reward from me than you are about that tarantula getting tricky, aren't you?

That is Treat and Retreat!

To do this with your dog, you must start with enough distance for your dog to be comfortable and there is no right answer for this – this distance can and will change and is entirely based off your dog's comfort level *in that moment*. At the correct distance, your dog should show no signs of stress or reactivity towards the stranger.

First, you have the stranger toss a treat behind your dog to encourage him to take the space he needs away from the stranger. Second, the stranger immediately moves away. This is important because most dogs don't actually understand how to remove themselves from an uncomfortable situation – they only react to it. Be sure to have the stranger toss the treat with minimal body language. If they are too enthusiastic, it may scare the dog further.

Next, after your dog eats the treat, he will probably turn or step towards the stranger. At that point, you will gently praise, and the stranger will toss the treat again before moving away once more. If your dog doesn't move closer, that's fine! The goal in the beginning is not to *try* to get your dog to move closer – it is simply to build a positive association with the stranger. If your dog begins to show excited interest in the stranger, feel free to jackpot with several treats or a *really* special and extra tasty one!

Remember, Treat and Retreat only works if the stranger can walk away after tossing the treat and provide that *relief*, which is the reward your dog really wants – the treat is a bonus that makes him more likely to want to play the game again.

Your goal is that your dog continues to become more comfortable and with the stranger because he is getting treats *and* the stranger moves away every time your dog approaches – he gets to have a tasty reward and doesn't have to endure anything scary to get it. That's like having your cake and eating it too! We want your dog to realize that there are no strings attached to a stranger's presence and that there is no need to be suspicious. As your dog gains confidence, the stranger will need to move away less and eventually your dog may even look forward to seeing a person you have worked with a few times.

It is important to note that the goal is *not* to make it harder for your dog each time or to even ask your dog to move closer - the goal is to have a lot of pleasant, stress-free interactions to replace the ones your dog sees as negative. Remember that it may be stressful for your dog to take all the steps necessary to eat out of the stranger's hand, so this may need to be broken up into a few sessions.



Do not let the stranger pet your dog until your dog is *extremely* relaxed around them and appears happy to see them. If we “trick” your dog into approaching the stranger by using food, but then push him too far by petting him, it will set us back because we will have proved him right – that stranger *was* scary! Just like that overly friendly tarantula!

Remember, we want this to be as pleasant and worthwhile as possible so don’t be shy or stingy with the rewards. You may not approach that scary tarantula for \$10 again, but if he offered you \$10,000 you may just run up and pet him!

With any fearful or nervous dog, space and distance are valuable rewards and can be used to your advantage. We want to show your dog that not only is walking away/disengaging an option, it’s a *really good* option and greatly preferred over reacting!

Remember to ask your Petsmart Trainer for other tips or tricks to help your dog live his best life!