

# Teaching Dogs to Settle and Relax

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When I try to help owners teach an anxious dog to respond calmly to its surroundings, I am unable to get very good results. What can I suggest to help them?

Unless a dog is calm, settled, and relaxed, it is unlikely to be able to learn something new. This is especially true for anxious and frightened dogs. An anxious dog focuses on the perceived threat—not on learning a new task. So the first goal in trying to change an unwanted behavior is to teach the pet to settle and relax on a verbal command. A calm, relaxed pet can be taught many new things.

This is not a simple obedience task. The goal is for the dog to be calm and quiet as evidenced by

physiologic changes, such as slower respiration and relaxed body postures and facial expressions.

## Basic Ground Rules

The owner should pick a location to begin the training. This could be a specific corner of a room, or the dog's bed or a rug, the latter of which would allow for a "mobile" relaxation spot. For many dogs, the task can be facilitated with a head collar and a leash. In the beginning,

continues

training should take place in a quiet, distraction-free environment. Food rewards usually yield the best results, especially tasty ones, such as people food. If the food makes the dog too excited, the owner should use a less-palatable treat or a toy. Food should be divided into very small pieces and always paired with a reward phrase, such as "good dog."

## How to Proceed

Start by giving the dog a command, such as "sit" or "down." Ask the dog to remain in this position and be calm. It can be useful to use a key phrase, such as "easy" or "steady," to help the pet associate relaxation with sit/down and stay. Commands must only be given one time, not repeated over and over. The owner must be able to gauge relaxation by watching facial expressions and body postures. The ears should be relaxed, the tail still, and the body relaxed and loose—not stiff and tight. Pupils should be a normal size, the eyes should not dart from side to side, and the brow should not be furrowed.

In most cases, it is necessary to watch the dog closely and reward small increments of relaxation. For example, if the dog is lying down but wagging its tail vigorously, no reward is given until the dog stops wagging its tail. Then the

command is given again. Over several repetitions, the dog learns not to wag its tail. Noncompliance is ignored by either looking or walking away.

Between each repetition the dog is asked to get up and come to the owner, and then is brought back to the spot and placed in position once again. Once the dog reliably keeps its tail still, the owner should begin to look for another sign of relaxation to reward, such as relaxed ear position or facial expression.

## Brevity & Jackpots

Training sessions should be brief—probably only about 5 minutes. This helps reduce frustration for both the owner and the pet. If a leash and head collar will be used in further training exercises, they should also be used during relaxation training.

It is important for the owner to progress slowly and not to rush the training. In some instances, the dog may let out a big sigh or put his head down, indicating total relaxation. It is essential that the owner reward such behavior with a large reward, typically known as a "jackpot," which could just be a handful of treats all at once. A jackpot is used to mark the response in

a very noticeable way. Since the performance was excellent and will be hard to replicate, the training session should end for that day. Keep in mind that it is always best to end on a high note.

Once the dog is calm with the owner nearby, the owner could take a few steps away from the pet and then return. If the dog does not move or change emotional state, the owner can begin to add minor distractions, such as clapping the hands or stamping the feet. Even at this stage, training sessions should remain short so that the dog is successful most of the time.

## Hitting the Target

Finally, the owner can use the relaxation techniques to begin desensitization exercises to address the problematic target stimuli. To properly desensitize the dog, a target stimulus must be kept at a low enough intensity so that the dog can respond in a relaxed manner. This is accomplished by developing a stimulus gradient, including all the relevant details of the stimulus, such as size, location, speed of approach, and noise level. With success, the target stimulus is gradually intensified until the dog responds to it in a relaxed manner. ■

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