

B-3 BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION TIER 2: PROTOCOL FOR DESENSITIZING DOMINANTLY AGGRESSIVE DOGS

Before desensitizing your dog to gestures or actions that may inadvertently encourage the dog to exhibit dominance aggression, you should have been working with the first two behavior modification protocols: "Protocol for Deference: Basic Program" and "Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Tier 1." In addition, you should have been complying with the "Protocol for Dogs With Dominance Aggression." The purpose of this program is to begin to shape the dog's undesirable behaviors into behaviors that are more desirable. You need to continue to observe the recommendations in "Protocol for Dogs With Dominance Aggression."

At the outset of these tasks, one person should be able to request that the dog sits and stays, both on- and off-lead, in the same format as recommended in Tier 1. The person giving the dog cues or commands (the rewarder or handler) is the one responsible for rewarding appropriate behaviors with food treats. Because the dog has already completed Tier 1 of the program with this person, the dog should not view this situation as confrontational. The goal of this protocol is to desensitize and countercondition the dog to gestures that it may or has considered challenging. This protocol requires the cooperation of a second person, the helper. The helper is to stand (or sit, if necessary) approximately 3 meters from the dog, off to the side of the animal. This means that the dog knows that the person is there and can see the person in its peripheral vision but that the dog can still attend to and focus directly on the person giving the cues. With one arm bent at the elbow and held at waist height and with the palm of that hand facing the floor, the second person should start to make small circles in the air. As the dog learns to ignore this distraction and relax while receiving treats as a reward for the relaxation, the helper will gradually make larger circles, move them from waist to shoulder height, approach the dog, make the gestures quicker, form the movements closer to the dog, and, eventually, reach down, press on the dog, and roll the dog over. This is a kinder, less threatening, more beneficial outcome than an "alpha roll," a "dominance down," or other forceful "dominance" exercises.

The program starts with the helper forming small circles close to his or her own body. While the dog sits quietly and attentively and looks as happy as possible (remember—unhappy or anxious dogs do not learn well to change their behavior), the size of the circles can be increased. If the dog remains relaxed, the helper can step closer to the dog, again decreasing the circle size. After the dog relaxes, the circle size is increased. Remember, larger gestures, closer to or over the dog, are potentially big threats to dominantly aggressive dogs. Repeating the pattern of small circles—relaxation—larger circles—relaxation—approach—small circles—relaxation—larger circles—relaxation, and so on, the helper should continue to approach the dog.

The team should work to the point at which the dog is able to sit quietly and remain inattentive to the handler with the rewards when large circles are made over the dog's head. Gradually the helper will approach the dog and attempt to touch and then push on the dog.

The program will take you through all the necessary steps. Remember, the following rules apply for this tier of the protocols as well as for the others:

1. You are only to reward the dog when it reacts appropriately. Never bribe the dog.
2. If the dog becomes distressed or anxious and cannot successfully complete some part of the program, back up and slowly work on the exercises with which the dog has problems. If the dog just cannot get past one suite of tasks, contact the veterinarian with whom you are working. Regardless, make sure that each session ends on a positive note.
3. Keep sessions short—15 to 20 minutes once or twice a day. If either you or your dog have trouble with that time block, use shorter but more frequent sessions (5-minute sessions eight times per day). Shorter sessions may work better for some dogs that appear to be unable to complete a suite of exercises.
4. If at any time you feel that the dog is becoming aggressive or if you or your helper feel threatened, stop for a few minutes and then resume.
5. If the dog appears to lose interest after a few days, make sure that you are rewarding it at the appropriate times in the response sequence. You may also need to change rewards at some point and use the dog's propensity to be interested in novel items.
6. If you or your helper feel safer or more comfortable with the dog on-lead, practice for the first few times with the dog on-lead. It may be best to work with a head collar. This can be an excellent idea because some dogs view all hand signals as threats and the Gentle Leader Promise System allows you to close the animal's mouth, thereby both preventing an injury and issuing a correction at the most appropriate time. If you use a halter, hold the leash in one hand and reward with the other. If you choose to just use a leash, put it under your foot with a small amount of slack. This leaves both your hands free, but requires that you can quickly slip your other foot across the leash so that the dog's head is held closer to the floor.

During these tasks the dog should remain attentive to the person giving the cues and rewards while the helper performs the potentially distracting activities. A brief glance at the helper is acceptable *if and only if* the dog is immediately responsive to a quick request to look at the handler (use the dog's name as you see the dog turning toward the helper: "Sparky, here!") or if the dog spontaneously returns its attention to the handler.

The helper forms small circles close to his or her body. When the dog sits quietly and attentively, the circles are increased in size and speed. If the dog remains relaxed, the helper can step toward the dog, again returning to the smaller circle size that is less threatening. As the dog relaxes the circle size should again be increased. It is sometimes helpful if the rewarder anticipates the next phase of the helper's actions and gets the dog's attention before the animal has time to be concerned. For example, as the helper steps forward, the rewarder could say "Sparky!" (use an upbeat tone) and reward the dog (if it behaves appropriately) as the helper makes his or her move. Go slowly. Large or quick gestures can be threats to dominantly aggressive dogs. By proceeding slowly, the helper can continue to approach the dog with progressively more complicated desensitization gestures.

Clients are often frustrated by this slow approach. Remember that regardless of your stage in the program, there are earlier tasks that you would not have been able to execute without the commitment to the desensitization and counterconditioning.

The helper eventually works to the point at which the dog is able to sit quietly and remain attentive while the

helper makes large circles over the dog's head. The circling hand should gradually be lowered until it just touches the dog's fur. If the dog permits this, the helper can gradually begin to apply more pressure to the dog with each pass of his hand. *Watch the dog carefully as the touching begins.* Many dominantly aggressive dogs will tolerate gestures that do not involve physical contact but will become aggressive at the least intimate contact. The rewarder is responsible for monitoring the dog's facial and eye gestures for the *least* sign of displeasure. At the first sign of this, the helper should back off. It is far wiser to not take any chances. You can always return to working at a less reactive level and gradually build to a more intimate level. A dog that may be unable to tolerate contact while off-lead may be able to learn to do it—and enjoy it—while on-lead wearing a head halter. Use every available option.

The objective of this program is to gradually work up to

Dog's Task

Make small circles at 3 meters
 Make large circles at 3 meters
 Make small circles at 2.5 meters
 Make large circles at 2.5 meters
 Make small circles at 2 meters
 Make large circles at 2 meters
 Make small circles at 1.5 meters
 Make large circles at 1.5 meters
 Make small circles at 1 meter
 Make large circles at 1 meter
 Make small circles at 0.5 meters
 Make large circles at 0.5 meters
 Make small circles at 0.25 meters
 Make large circles at 0.25 meters
 Bend at the waist at 0.25 meters and make small circles above the dog's head
 Bend at the waist at 0.25 meters and make large circles above the dog's head
 Make small circles immediately above the dog's head
 Make large circles immediately above the dog's head*
 Quickly and lightly brush the dog's fur while circling above the dog's back*
 Repeat the above and brush for a slightly longer time*
 Repeat, increasing pressure slightly*
 Repeat, with petting pressure*
 Press gently on the dog's shoulders*
 Press moderately on the dog's shoulders*
 Press firmly on the dog's shoulders*
 Press firmly on the dog's back*
 Keep increasing pressure on the dog until the dog is pushed to the ground*
 Massage the neck, shoulders, and hips*
 Roll on to back so that the dog's belly is exposed*
 Massage the belly, groin, and chest gently*

*CAUTION: These gestures can be viewed as threats by the dog; observe the dog's signaling carefully and do not take risks. Not all dogs will succeed at the highest levels, but frequent repetitions often allow them to do so.

For Future Repetitions

- Repeat all tasks in different locations.
- Repeat all tasks with all family members.
- Repeat all tasks with only every second or third task being rewarded with a treat. (Remember praise!)
- Repeat with only intermittent treat reinforcement. (Remember praise!)

the point at which the helper can push the dog to the ground without any resistance. Once this is possible, the entire program should be repeated in different rooms, indoors and outside, and from different positions relative to the dog (behind the dog and, the more threatening position, in front of the dog). Everyone in the household should practice as both the rewarder and the helper. The ultimate hope is that people will be able to rush up and hug the dog. *Not all dogs will attain this level of behavioral change.* Caution is urged, and some dogs may *never* be able to be hugged and surrounded by strangers. One of the benefits of these programs is that you will become aware of gestures that signal the dog's limits and can decide whether you wish to attempt to modify these.

A sample map/floor plan is provided that illustrates a physical layout that works well for these types of protocols.

Comments about response or difficulty