

The Mannerly Dog
A Mannerly Dog is Easy to Love
Pasadena, Texas

TEACHING REACTIVE DOGS A NEW HABIT, PART II: “LOOK AT THAT!”

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Dogs that react very quickly to certain stimuli are often trained as hearing alert dogs; these dogs don't miss a thing, and are trained to alert their handlers to important sounds. But if dogs learn to react to new things entering their environment by barking and lunging, they become difficult to train for anything – even going on a nice walk with the family. We want the dog to notice what's coming into his field of perception, we just want to teach him how to respond in a way that works for everyone.

Previously, I wrote about a training technique that you can use almost “in the moment,” when you're out with your dog and a trigger stimulus – something that tends to make the dog react – appears in your vicinity. That is the “Open Bar” technique (see Teaching Reactive Dogs a New Habit, Part I: “Open Bar”.) In this article, I'll explain a technique called “Look at That!” which breaks the process down into even smaller, more controllable pieces so that you can easily set up practice sessions and your dog can learn it very quickly. I like to use both techniques, interchanging them as needed, to prevent a problem from occurring, or to change the behavior once it has reared its ugly head. The most recent and well-known version of “Look at That!” is explained in wonderful detail in a book called *Control Unleashed* by Leslie McDevitt.

We want the dog to do a ‘chained’ behavior of (1) Look at Something, then (2) Look at Owner. It's helpful to use a clicker to mark the dog looking at something in the beginning stages in order to reinforce both individual parts of the behavior. The best way to practice this is to find a comfortable place to sit or stand outside with the dog on a leash; somewhere familiar with people, dogs, and bikes going by regularly but at a low frequency. Pretend to mind your own business, but focus fully on the dog so as to be able to notice when he looks at something. When he turns his head away to look at something, click. He will immediately turn back to look at you – give him a treat. It's just that simple. If your dog is unfamiliar with a clicker, he'll look at you to see what the sound was. When you give him the treat, he'll begin to understand that when he hears the click, a treat is on the way. If your dog is afraid of the click, use the word, “Yes!” pronounced softly but happily; it will mark the behavior just as the click will.

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Although we call this behavior, “Look at That,” it’s not necessary to tell the dog to do it; he will look at something at some point – you capture that behavior by clicking and giving a treat, and you’ve done one repetition. You can teach the dog to “Look at That” on your verbal cue once he is reliably offering this behavior, usually after several training sessions. Add the cue words just as he’s turning to look at something, click, then treat. Once he’s responding consistently to the words, you’ll be able to tell him to “Look at That!” and he’ll turn to look wherever you’re facing or pointing. Always reinforce this, because you want him to choose to happily “Look,” rather than other behaviors such as barking and lunging. Always practice this, because it has far-reaching effects which include looking to you for guidance, a valuable attitude. Putting it on the verbal cue is not necessary to get the benefits this behavior offers; it’s just a development you can add. Even when you put the behavior on cue, continue to reinforce the default behavior of looking at something that could be disturbing to your dog and then looking back at you.

“Look at That” may be difficult to understand until you’ve tried doing it with your dog. If you resist the urge to complicate it, and view it as simply a head turn toward something followed by a head turn toward yourself, you will reap the benefits of your dog paying attention to you more often and of him choosing to look to you for guidance rather than take matters into his own paws when he perceives the need to bark his head off at something.

With diligent and consistent work on this behavior, and lots and lots of positive reinforcement, you'll begin to see your dog look purposefully at something and then at you as if to say, "Did you see me look at that? I get a treat for that, right?" At that point, you know you've successfully communicated to your dog what you want, and he is responding to an old cue in a new way. Bingo.

This training game, like most others, works through classical conditioning of an emotional response along with operant conditioning of a behavior. Classical conditioning changes the dog’s emotional response from defense toward a threat to anticipation of something good; operant conditioning is reinforcing the behavior of turning to look at something new in the dog’s environment followed by turning to look at you. This is powerful stuff and you’ll be changing your dog’s perception of something new in his environment from threatening to the source of a game with you; you’ll see the difference in his perception when he starts looking at what was previously a trigger to bark and lunge, then looking at you, and if you miss that first series of what he’s looking at, he’ll repeat the chain again as though to say, “Hey, do you see what I’m doing?! Where’s my treat?”