

Teaching your dog to ignore something.....



Useful for

- Dog who bark at things
- Dogs who chase things
- Dogs who are scared of things
- Dogs who behave aggressively towards things (see safety note)

When your dog mis-behaves around people, cars, bikes, wheelie-bins, fireworks, noises in the house, noises in the garden, other dogs etc. etc. , then one useful thing you can do is to teach your dog to ignore these things.

This is a bit of a sweeping generalisation! This information is not meant to stand on it's own! It is important to deal effectively with all the issues a dog may have surrounding any of these problems, and to work on a carefully planned behaviour modification program. This note is meant simply to help with the “**desensitisation**” part of such a program. **Desensitisation** in dog training simply means to work with your dog to help them to desensitise to triggers that cause the dog to behave in a way that is unacceptable for you. i.e. to help your dog to ignore the thing(s) that set them off.

Put simply what is required is to present the trigger at a low intensity whilst keeping the dog occupied with training, treats, toys, or a chew for instance. You are therefore giving the dog something else to concentrate on, rather than paying attention to the trigger. Then, over a number of sessions, depending on the context, you gradually increase the intensity of the trigger.

The intensity can be manipulated by : volume, distance, speed, size, and by for any particular thing, you can further reduce the intensity by considering the different things that a particular object does.

e.g. Stopping your dog chasing / killing the Hoover (or running away from it scared). A Hoover makes a noise; moves; and has someone beside it to make it work, and perhaps it is removed from a cupboard. The desensitisation process is then to, for instance, get your dog used to the Hoover with no-one beside it, and switched off, at a distance away from the dog. (You may even need to start with teaching your dog to ignore the cupboard door being opened.) So for instance, it could be in the hall, whilst you are **keeping your dog occupied** in the living room – in sight of it. Once your dog starts to ignore it at a distance, then you gradually reduce the distance. A separate exercise would be to have it switched on, with a couple of closed doors inbetween; thus reducing the volume. Once your dog ignores that level, then open one door, then two , then move closer etc. And then you also work on an exercise where someone is slowly moving the Hoover with it switched off; then working with it switched off, and moving, but at a distance. Then over a number of sessions, your gradually blend all the things together until you succeed.

e.g. Chasing Bikes. Similarly, bikes exist, move, need someone to peddle them, can be a distance away, can move slowly and can move quickly, can be on it's own, or there could be a group. Each aspect needs to be presented to the dog at a low intensity first, and then gradually increase that, as the dog learns to cope (ignore) each level.

What's the trick?

Generally what goes wrong, is that the dog simply doesn't get enough opportunity to learn to ignore something – at a level that they can cope with. The two things therefore that are important are : repetitions, and arousal level.

1. **Repetitions** : there's no magic here. The desensitisation exercises simply have to be done 20 times a day for a few seconds or a few minutes, depending on what your dog can cope with. Never take it too far such that your dog starts to respond to the trigger, or be overwhelmed with it all.
2. **Arousal level**: if your dog is already highly excited or already growling, or worse, then you will not be able to get their attention. There is no point in trying. You need to reduce the intensity of the experience and start at a lower level. You may even need some calm down time. **More about arousal** : dogs are keen observers and notice things that we simply take for granted (actually, that's the crux of the problem really). So whilst we think “hoovering”, the dog has been watching out for the things that happen prior to us doing that, and then becoming increasingly more anxious or aroused. Each time you do something else that ticks the boxes to “Yes, definitely hoovering”, they become one step more aroused. Hence the comment above about maybe needing to start with teaching your dog to ignore the cupboard door.
3. **Keeping your dog occupied** : you need to teach your dog to respond to you in training or play with no distractions at all before starting the desensitisation exercises.

Safety Warning: aggressive dogs are dangerous – well that goes without saying. Never put any-one or any-thing in danger when trying these exercises. Always thinks safety first. That may mean on-lead or wearing a muzzle. Best advice is to get a qualified person to work these exercises through with you first, and to help you to analyse the risk factors.