

Response Training

Revised 12/12/20

Although our thrust is towards having our dogs “Alert” to some recognizable stimulus, the very process of alerting requires that the dog respond in some unique way, such that a human is informed that the subject stimulus has occurred. Much of what we teach our dogs is in the form of commands. These commands can be verbal, or visual. When we say “down” or when we point to the floor, we expect the dog to lie down. Here the stimulus is the word or pointing action, and the dog’s response is the act of lying down. However, the stimulus that initiates a response can be many things, such as the odor of peanuts, the smell of a diabetic’s breath, the sound of child’s heavy breathing, the sight of unusual physical activity, etc.

Stimulus Identification for the dog

The first step is to tell the dog that the target stimulus is important to them. We are essentially asking them to identify some difference from the norm. Since they encounter many different stimuli in any given day, they must be told which of these many differences are of significance.

For our allergy applications, we can “set them up”. For example for a peanut allergy, we must first create an ambient environment that is devoid of peanut odor. This can be a challenge, as so many food products incorporate peanuts, or peanut oil. However, it can be accomplished by placing all offending products in tightly sealed containers, or the refrigerator or freezer. Now when a peanut butter jar is opened, this is clearly something new. You tell them that it is significant by rewarding them with a treat, or praise. This process requires development, because at this first encounter, the dog may consider the sight of certain shaped jar or just the action you bending down to be the important stimulus. So you need to eliminate these other variables. You can present the odor in other forms; peanut butter on a spoon, or on a cracker or a raw peanut, rewarding in each case. You can negatively reinforce by presenting an empty peanut butter jar, with no reward. In this process, be very careful that the dog does not eat the sample. We want them to identify odor, not taste.

For a diabetic child, we cannot set things up so neatly, but must take advantage of natural occurrences. However, if the dog is present whenever glucose testing is performed, we can reach the same end as above. I.e. the dog is rewarded when the test indicates that the measurement is below some pre-determined level. Here, there will be other varying stimuli (music, other household odors, etc.), but the dog will soon learn the unique breath odor is the only common stimuli which yields rewards.

Human recognition of the dog’s recognition

An interesting problem now arises. The dog has learned to recognize some specific stimulus, as being important. However, this is useless unless the human victim, or handler, knows that the dog has

recognized something. Trying to train a desired response will be useless, and may be counter-productive, if attempted when the dog is not in a recognition mode.

For allergy training, this is easy, as the dog will usually sniff at, and become excited by the odor. At any rate, we can reward only when we know that a significant odor is present. In fact we can intentionally intensify the odor (proximity, amount, warming, etc.) so that we know that the dog must be aware.

For the diabetic case, we have less control. We can exaggerate, to some extent through proximity and/or treating more lavishly for extreme lows. However, we must generally look for other clues. Here, the general rule is look for something different in the dog's behavior. This could be panting or other signs of nervousness. It could be as simple as to how the dog holds his tail (stop wagging, between the legs, etc.). I have found that the dog's eye focus can be a strong indicator. They might focus on the victim, out of concern. They often focus their gaze on the trainer (the one who has been giving the reward). With their eyes, they are saying, I smell something important, where is my reward?

Developing The Desired Response.

From the above, however subtle, the dog should already have a response to the desired stimulus. Our job now is to add to that response, the response that we desire. Every family's needs, in this area, will differ, and it is beyond the scope of this article to cover all possible situations. However, most complex responses are necessarily made up of simpler commands already known. I.e. a necessary pre-cursor to this step is to have a library of highly proficient basic commands at your disposal.

This discussion assumes that the natural subtle response has been noted before proceeding with the following steps. This is the safest approach. However, there may be situations where the dog's natural response cannot be detected. If that is the case, you must make the assumption that the dog is aware of the desired stimulus, and proceed anyway. The danger here is that you may be teaching the dog to respond to so some other stimulus. If this is discovered, an undesired response can usually be un-taught with just a series on "nos" or "don'ts".

A common desired response is to just sit and woof. Clearly, to develop this response, "sit" and "speak" commands should already be perfected. I just discovered that "speak" is not one of our basic commands. It should be! With our dogs, it should be easy to teach, as they tend to be quite vocal. I usually just require that you get them excited by teasing them with a favorite toy, until they bark. Then, say "speak" and reward them. You can customize the bark to a quiet woof by only rewarding the quieter responses. At any rate, this sequence begins with just a reward when you feel that they responded properly. Then you require them to sit, before rewarding. Then add the speak command. They will gradually learn to sit and woof with no prompting. To extend this to having the dog find a parent/guardian before sitting and woofing, just gradually move farther and farther away from the dog, using the "come" command, if necessary. Continue this until you are well out of sight, and they have to find you to get their reward. Early on, in this process, find a special treat to use as this reward, and reserve it specifically for this response. You can gradually evolve to praise, with occasional use of the special treat as a refresher.

Another common response is to find the parent/guardian and paw at them. I prefer a "sit" and "paw". This, of course, requires that you first teach "paw". I teach this by sitting with a treat just out of the dogs reach. They may try to jump on your lap with both feet to get it. Say "off" and no reward. Eventually, they will put up just one foot. Then say "paw" and reward. Now, you just have to replace "speak" with "paw" in the above procedure.

This is just an overview. When program enrollees have identified specific desired responses, we can devote entire training sessions to given specific responses.