

# Using *Control Unleashed* for Dog-Dog Aggression:

## Look at That

Marisa Scully, CPDT-KA

**A**s I described in part one of *Using Control Unleashed for Dog-Dog Aggression* (May/June 2011), I have found many of the concepts and training protocols described in Leslie McDevitt's *Control Unleashed* to be extremely effective in teaching dog-reactive dogs to feel comfortable and maintain desirable behavior in a city environment.

Although city walking is quite different from the typical *Control Unleashed* group class, which is focused on preparing dogs for sports, the general principles and concepts are the same:

- Reading the dog
- Understanding thresholds
- Providing handlers with appropriate responses
- Reducing response time of handler and recovery time of dog
- Clear communication and expectations
- Achieving focus
- Promoting relaxation
- Reframing the picture – changing the feelings, not just the behavior
- Developing a trusting and helpful relationship between dog and handler

For many dogs, even those who are “friendly” or enjoy the company of other dogs, walking past a strange dog while confined to the sidewalk is extremely challenging

and stressful. My goal is not only to help the owners teach their dogs some alternative behaviors to the ones the dogs may have chosen on their own (vocalizing, pulling, lunging, redirecting aggression, etc.) but also to change the feelings behind these behaviors (stress, anxiety, confusion, frustration, arousal, etc.) so that the dog is behaving appropriately because he feels alright about seeing the other dog.

I mentioned in part one that many clients resort to punishment to attempt to curb these behaviors, and I offered positive alternatives using some foundation behaviors from *Control Unleashed*. Another very common technique owners have tried is distraction. This can often be a useful management tool, but rarely helps to actually change the underlying emotional response the dog is having. I explain to the owner that if the dog is not reacting because he is not looking at the trigger or is preoccupied, this does not mean that we are changing the dog's response to this trigger, just that we are avoiding it. In some cases the fact that the owner always feeds the dog around another dog regardless of behavior will actually work as a counter-conditioner, but often the dogs need a little extra help, which is where the genius of the “look at that” game comes into play.

When introducing this game, I begin by explaining that orienting to the other dog with eye contact is usually the first step in the dog's interaction with the other dog (by “interaction” I mean the way they deal with even the presence of the other dog, even if the two aren't “interacting” in the usual sense). If we can reframe this very first moment when the dog orients to the trigger, >



Photo 1: Look at other dog walking at distance.



Photo 2: Look back at handler between glances other dog.

and put the mental picture of the other dog in a positive light, we can change the emotional response, eventually even changing the dog's feelings in more involved interactions as well. I also explain that trying to discourage looking at the other dog can actually give the dog even more anxiety about the presence of the trigger. The reactive dog likely wants to gain information visually, and knowing where the dog is and what it is doing can sometimes be comforting. McDevitt uses a great example in her book that I often use to help people try to understand.

"If you were walking in a dark forest and kept hearing rustling noises in the bushes, you'd want to see if anything was coming out of those bushes at you. If you were walking with a companion that demanded you constantly watch him, you might comply if you were motivated enough, but a lot of your brain would still be engaged in worrying about what might be in the bushes. Therefore, you would not be able to give your full attention to your companion even if it seemed you were." (p. 124/125) .

The goal is to teach the dog that it is acceptable to look at another dog; we want to try to get the dog to think, "Yes, it's there. No, it's not a big deal." Once any stigma about looking at the dog has been removed, we can start to teach the dog to offer the glance at the other dog as part of a fun game, and begin to really turn the mental image of the other dog into a predictor of good things to come.

Only after I think the client has a thorough understanding of thresholds (which I discussed in part one) do I introduce the "look at that" game. I explain the importance of only playing the game when the dog is sub-threshold and not trying to force training when the dog is having a reaction due to an unexpected approach by a trigger. I begin teaching the game inside the home.



Photo 3: Look at other dog closer.

1. I start with the dog calmly offering eye contact. Then I bring a neutral object (something that has no meaning to the dog, like a roll of paper towels) out from behind my back, and click for eye contact with the neutral object.
2. I put the object back behind my back in between the first couple of glances so that I can control how much eye contact the dog is offering and prevent what I call "ping-pong eye," where the dog just starts offering glances back and forth between me and the object without really thinking.
3. Once I feel the dog is beginning to anticipate the presence of the neutral object and is offering glances and then looking back to me for his or her reward, I will place the object on a counter or have the owner hold it and practice having the dog glance at the object on cue by saying "look at that" or whatever cue we have decided to assign to the behavior for this particular dog. I encourage my clients to choose something generic like "look at that" or "what's there?" so that they will not feel awkward repeating the cue in public, or making the person walking the other dog feel uncomfortable. Even saying something like "see the dog" can make the other dog owner start to pay attention, when we just want them to keep walking.
4. I tell the client to practice this game with many different neutral objects.
5. Once the dog has recognized and enjoys the "look at that" game inside the house with neutral objects we start to play outside, still with neutral objects.

I encourage people to play the game with friendly neighbors who don't mind being incorporated into the game, or other moving objects that the dog is not triggered by. *[continued on next page]*



Photo 4: Look back at handler between glances other dog.

Once we have a dog that is comfortable and happy playing the game, I begin to transition him to playing it with another dog, but only in sub-threshold situations. I have a training partner, Perry DeWitt, CPDT-KA, who has been through this process with one of her own dogs. We often use Perry's dog to display what the "finished product" of the game looks like. I think that the concept of the game can be a bit difficult to grasp, and watching the body language of a comfortable dog who understands the game can really help the owner understand what they are striving for. I also have Perry handle any decoy dog that we use for this process; this way I don't have to worry about handler error that could potentially happen if we used a friend or neighbor to handle the other dog.

I once again emphasize to my clients how important it is to make the distinction between behavior modification and management, and when in doubt, just use management and get out of Dodge.

As the mental image of the other dog begins to become the predictor of a fun game, we work on gradually decreasing thresholds and increasing tolerance to movement and proximity of the other dog.

When done properly, the dog begins to enjoy the mental picture of the other dog coming and view it as a predictor that a fun game is about to start with his or her handler. A dog who is sub-threshold and enjoying the "look at that game" as something he is doing with the handler should look back at the handler in between glances at the other dog. Any fixation or prolonged glances are a sign that the dog may be over threshold. Because of all of the work we have done with default behaviors, the goal is that the dog will default to playing the "look at that" game whenever he sees the other dog. McDevitt explains, "Since you don't always notice your dog's triggers before he does, reframing a trigger as an environmental cue to reorient to you is very helpful." When clients have their first experience with a surprise dog coming from around a corner and instead of their dog exploding, he begins to offer glances at the dog for treats, this is a triumphant moment! Because there are



Photo A - Looking neutral object.

so many components to a dog's threshold, I never tell people to expect that their dog will never again react or that we can completely desensitize him to his triggers in any combination of contexts, but over time the dog and owner are able to enjoy their walks and stay connected with each other.

One of the challenges I often find with people who are understandably frustrated, stressed, embarrassed and anxious about their dog's behavior is that they want to focus on training directly in the situations where they want to see the changes, and not work on foundation skills inside the home (see part one for foundation skills). One of the things I explain to clients is that not only is the foundation work important, it also creates tools to use in especially challenging contexts. Furthermore, it builds a relationship that in and of itself helps the dog better cope with difficult situations. Of course the dog loves the food and other rewards he gets during training, but with positive training the dog will begin to love the act of training itself, and the way it makes him feel. The same way many dogs LOVE playing agility, even though they initially had to be taught to try the obstacles using other motivators as rewards. Once the dog makes a positive association with training as a whole, and develops a trusting relationship with his or her handler, the challenges they face together become much more manageable.

### Case Study

**Dog** – Summer is a 5-year-old spayed female Yorkshire Terrier

**History** – Summer was adopted through a private rescue a few months prior. Her owner had already worked with a trainer who helped her begin to learn how to work for food rewards and started her on some basic obedience as well as a "nothing in life is free" program. The other trainer felt that Summer was too aroused while outside to be able to be trained and told the owner her behavior around other dogs would probably never be able to change.➤



Photo B - Look back at handler between neutral object 2.

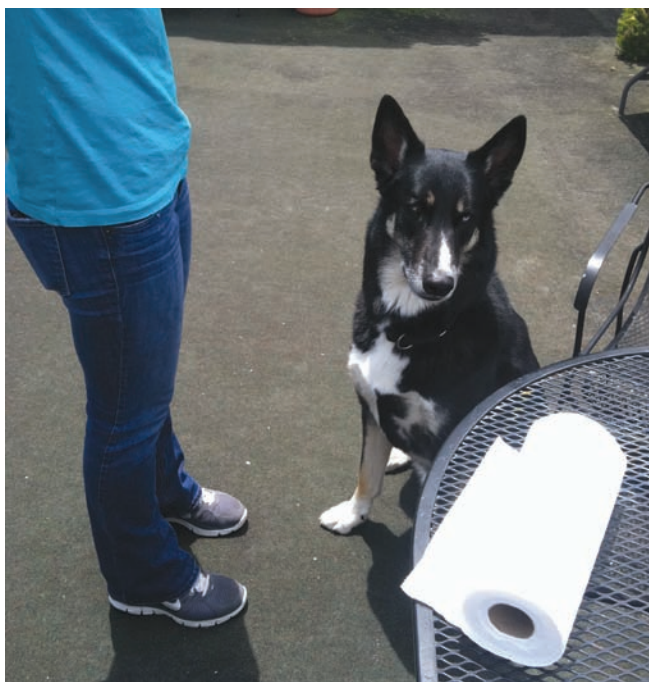


Photo C - Neutral object out of hand on cue.



Photo D - Look back at handler between neutral object.

**Presenting behavior** – Summer would lunge, growl, bark, snap at other dogs while on leash, or while dragging her leash at a local pet store. The behavior presented with more intensity when in the presence of larger, darker colored dogs. Though the behaviors were disconcerting, Summer had never bitten another dog even though she was not always restrained in their presence.

**Initial evaluation** – Summer was very friendly to humans and happy to work for food rewards inside and outside the home. Summer's breathing would speed up when walking outside and her body would become tense. She became fixated on other dogs in view but was able to

redirect attention for brief intervals in order to eat treats if the other dog was far enough away (approximately 20 feet to start).

Training prior to the “look at that” game – Summer had a nice foundation for clicker training when we began so we started by teaching her about eye contact inside the home, and then reinforced it outside. Summer began to orient to her handler much more frequently and for longer duration outside the home as soon as food rewards were introduced. She became much more focused on her handler than on her environment and within two sessions was walking primarily on a loose leash unless another dog was in sight. We instructed Summer's owner to reward heavily any time another dog was in their general vicinity and Summer did not react by lunging/growling/barking/snapping. If she did have a reaction, we instructed her owner to immediately increase distance and begin to deliver food rewards as soon as Summer ceased the unwanted behavior. We spent some time just walking through the city together and practicing “damage control” in this way.

Preliminary session with “look at that” small dog – We began with another small dog standing still and focusing on his handler. We walked Summer toward the dog until we found a comfortable threshold where she was aware of the dog but not reacting. We marked glances towards the other dog and rewarded by throwing food on the sidewalk in the opposite direction from the other dog, thus incorporating movement away from the other dog into the reward delivery (directional reinforcement). We found that Summer was more eager to get her food reward when it was tossed on the ground and this also helped her redirect her head away from the other dog (not to mention it was nice to not have to bend over for to deliver each treat!) Within the first few repetitions Summer showed clear awareness of the fact that her glances were what was earning her the food rewards. She quickly became eager to glance at the other dog and look back to her handler. We were able to decrease distance very quickly and within minutes Summer was only a few feet from the other dog, only looking at him briefly to offer glances. We felt confident that she was comfortable enough to sniff him if she decided to do so, and after about 15 minutes we were walking the dogs side by side. Because Summer seemed so comfortable with the small dog we took them inside so that we could drop their leashes and allow them to interact freely, allowing us to gauge how much of Summer's discomfort outside was due to the leash/environment and what her social skills were like once she had a bit more freedom. Summer initiated play within the first few minutes of being inside the home with the other dog and the two of them hit it off rather nicely.

First session with “look at that” large dog – We began this session with a warm-up with the same small dog Summer had become acquainted with in a previous session so that we could practice [continued on next page]

“looking at” another dog, beginning on a positive note. Summer seemed to remember the other dog and very easily resumed offering glances. When we switched to the larger dog, Summer’s thresholds decreased and she began lunging and barking briefly, but then redirecting herself back towards her handler. Summer’s owner was perplexed as to whether or not to reward this behavior as she was redirecting on her own and much more easily than she had previously, but the unwanted behaviors were still present. I told her that in a real life situation I would reward the redirection back toward the owner but for the purpose of the exercise I wanted to keep her sub-threshold and increase distance.

Once we restarted the exercise a bit farther away and got Summer back to only offering calm glances, we were able to decrease distance pretty quickly. After being able to get within 6 to 10 feet of the other dog we decided to change roles, standing still with Summer while moving around with the large dog. Once the large dog started moving, Summer’s threshold went way down, even though we had increased distance greatly in anticipation of this. Along with beginning at a greater distance, my partner and I decided to incorporate additional distance into the exercise as a reward. Whenever Summer glanced calmly at the other dog, my partner moved away with him away while I rewarded Summer with food. We found that the increase in distance combined with the food reward made a huge impact on Summer and once again we were able to begin to decrease distance.

Second session with large dog – We began this session having the large dog remaining mostly still and moving closer with Summer, rewarding successful application of the “look at that” game with food tossed in the opposite direction and a brief retreat. Summer did very well and we switched to remaining in the same place with her while moving the other dog towards and away from her as she glanced and looked to her handler for a reward. After success with this application we then began to do some parallel walking, where we again increased distance, but were able to progress quickly as Summer was very confident with the protocols, what was expected of her, and the fact that she could control the outcome of the interaction with her own behavior. Soon we had the dogs in close proximity and a few brief sniffs were exchanged. The temperature was very high on this particular day and both dogs were very hot. We took them inside, still on-leash together to cool off and get a drink. Summer was clearly more agitated than when the small dog had been inside with her, and she did lunge and bark at the large dog at one point, in response to which he moved away from her. We then calmly sat with the dogs about 10-15 feet apart and encouraged them to settle while we discussed training plans.

Third session with large dog – During this session we were able to work the dogs up to being close together fairly quickly as the protocols were very familiar and Summer had been doing very well practicing the “look

at that” game in between sessions with other dogs in the neighborhood. We then walked the dogs together and let them get used to each other’s proximity. We brought them inside before they got too hot, increased distance once inside, and played the “look at that” game. Summer was eager to play the game inside and even decreased distance on her own. At this point the dogs were very close and we took turns having each handler reward each dog, so that getting closer to the other dog/handler was rewarded further by getting food rewards from another source. A few times Summer lifted a lip if she felt the large dog was too close, but we felt pleased that her social signals were ritualized and controlled and delivered only with enough intensity to get her point across. By the end of the session the dogs had sniffed each other a few times and were very close in proximity.

Fourth session with large dog – As the owner was able to do more and more practice with family/friends/neighborhood dogs in between sessions and Summer became more familiar with our large decoy dog, we were able to move through the same exercises even more quickly this time. Even though some of the exercises may seem repetitive I believe the predictability of the training ritual helps the dogs remember that this is something familiar and comfortable, and gives them information about what to expect. By the end of the fourth session both dogs were off leash moving through the inside of the house taking treats from all of the people involved and respecting each other’s space while still able to be in close proximity.

Follow-up sessions – We have been repeating this routine with other large dogs to help Summer generalize her new behaviors around other dogs, not just certain ones with whom she is familiar. Summer loves offering glances and even sometimes tries to “look at” people or other things in order to initiate the game when I first arrive, before we bring the other dog into the environment. Her confidence surrounding the game and therefore around other dogs has allowed her to become much more social with the dogs she knows, and certainly has made walking through the neighborhood exponentially more enjoyable for herself and her owner. Summer’s case is one of the most successful I have seen as she is not only able to tolerate the presence of another dog in brief passing or at a distance but she is also able to share space, even in the presence of valuable resources.

*Marisa Scully, CPDT-KA, began training professionally in 2007 and has continued to expand her knowledge and expertise through experience and education and close relationships with other professionals in her field. Marisa teaches and trains at Y2K9’s dog sports club and also runs her own small business, “Philly Dog Training.” She lives in Philadelphia with her three dogs and usually a foster dog from the PSPCA.*