

Protocol for Relaxation

Adapted for use by students and seminar attendees at

By Dr. Karen L. Overall



Clinical Behavioral Medicine for Small Animals, 1997.

<http://K9corps.club>

This program is the foundation for all other behavior modification programs. Its purpose is to teach the dog to sit and stay *while relaxing* in a variety of circumstances. The circumstances change from very reassuring ones with you present to potentially more stressful ones when you are absent. The purpose of the program is not to teach the dog to sit; sitting (or lying down, if the dog is more comfortable) is only a tool. The goals of the program are to teach the dog to relax, to defer to you, to enjoy earning a salary for an appropriate, desirable behavior, and to develop, as a foundation, a pattern of behaviors that allow the dog to cooperate with future behavior modification (generally desensitization and counter-conditioning). This protocol acts as a foundation for teaching the dog context-specific appropriate behavior. The focus is to teach the dog to rely on you for all the cues as to the appropriateness of its behavior so that it can then learn not to react inappropriately.

About Food Treats

This program uses food treats. Please read the logic behind this approach in the "Protocol for Deference: Basic Program." Remember, the treats are used as a salary or reward-not as a bribe. If you bribe a problem dog, you are defeated before you start. It is often difficult to work with a problem dog that has learned to manipulate bribes, but there are creative ways - often involving the use of head collars -to correct this situation. First, find a food that the dog likes and that it does not usually experience. Suggestions include boiled, slivered chicken or tiny pieces of cheese. Boiled, shredded chicken can be frozen in small portions and defrosted as needed. Individually wrapped slices of cheese can be divided into tiny pieces suitable for behavior modification while still wrapped in plastic, minimizing waste and mess. Consider the following guidelines in choosing a food reward:

1. Foods that are high in protein may help induce changes in brain chemistry that help the dog relax
2. Dogs should not have chocolate because it can be toxic to them
3. Some dogs do not do well with treats that contain artificial colors or preservatives
4. Dogs with food allergies or those taking monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOI) drugs may have food restrictions (cheese, for dogs taking MAOIs [deprenyl])
5. Dog biscuits generally are not sufficient motivation, but some foods are so desirable that the dog is too stimulated by them to relax - something between these two extremes is preferred
6. Treats should be tiny (less than half the size of a thumbnail) so that the dog does not get full, fat, or bored
7. If the dog stops responding for one kind of treat, try another
8. Do not let treats make up the bulk of the dog's diet; the dog needs its normal, well-balanced ration

The Reward Process

Rewarding dogs with food treats is an art. Learning to do so correctly helps the dog focus on the exercises and keeps everyone safe. To prevent the dog from lunging for the food, keep the already prepared treats in a little cup or plastic bag behind your back and keep one treat in the hand used to reward the dog. That hand can then either be kept behind your back so that the dog does not stare at the food or can be moved to your eye so that you can teach the dog to look happy and make eye contact with you. The food treat must be small so that the focus of the dog's attention is not a slab of food but rather your cues. A treat of the correct size can be closed in the palm of the hand by folding the fingers and will not be apparent when held between the thumb and forefingers. When presenting the dog with the treat, bring the hand, with a lightly closed fist, up quickly to the dog (do not startle the dog) and turn your wrist to open your hand.

When starting the program, let the dog smell and taste the reward so that it knows the anticipated reward for the work. If the dog is too terrified to approach, you can place a small amount of the treat on the floor. Then ask the dog to "sit"; if the dog sits instantly, say "Good girl (boy)!" and instantly open your hand to give the dog the treat instantly while saying "stay."

Getting the Dog's Attention

If the dog does not sit instantly, call its name again. As soon as the dog looks at or attends to you, say "Sit." If the dog will not look at you and pay attention, do not continue to say "Sit." If you continue to give a command that you cannot reinforce, the dog learns to ignore that command. If necessary, use a whistle or make an unusual sound with your lips to get the dog's attention. As soon as the dog looks at you, say "Sit." Use a cheerful voice. Some people may have to soften or lower their voice almost to a whisper to get the dog to pay attention to them. Often this is because they have given all their previous commands to the dog by yelling. The dog has very successfully learned to ignore this.

If the dog is looking at you but not sitting, approach the dog to close the distance, raise the treat gently to your eyes, and request "sit." Often just moving toward a dog helps the dog sit. Not only have you decreased the distance, but you appear taller and to be over the dog; such behaviors are used in canine communication to get the lower (in relative elevation) dog to obey the desires of the higher one. You can use these innate dog behaviors as long as you are careful. Never back up a dog that is growling. Never corner a fearful dog. Never continue to approach a dog that acts more aggressively the closer you come. Remember, the point of the program is to teach the dog to relax and look to you for the cues about the appropriateness of its behavior. The dog cannot do this if upset.

If the dog still will not sit, consider using a head collar. By using a long-distance lead you can request that the dog "sit" and gently enforce this from a distance by pulling on the lead. Reward with a treat as soon as the dog sits.

Cautionary Note:

If your dog is aggressive or if you are concerned about approaching it, do not do any of these exercises off-lead until the dog is perfect on-lead. Fit the dog with a head collar and work with the dog only on a lead at the outset. The halter allows you to close the dog's mouth if the dog begins to be aggressive. This is an ideal correction because it meets the rule that psychologists have established for ideal "punishment": you have interrupted the dog's inappropriate behavior within the first few seconds of the beginning of the behavior so that the dog can learn from the experience. Be gentle but consistent. Taking your anger or fear out on the dog will only worsen the behavior. As soon as the dog responds to the halter and calmly sits, reward the dog and continue. *Never reward a dog that is growling, lunging, barking, shaking, or urinating.*

After the dog sits for the first time you are ready to begin the program. Remember the following guidelines:

- Use the dog's name to get the dog to orient toward you and to pay attention. If this does not work, use a whistle or a sound to which the dog is not accustomed.
- Once the dog is attending to you (paying attention) say "sit" and give the dog 3 to 5 seconds to respond. If the dog *does* sit, reward it instantly; if not, repeat the "sit" command in the same calm, cheerful voice. You may want to experiment with voices to see the tonal qualities to which your dog best responds.
- Do not worry about using the dog's name frequently or about repeating the commands if the dog responds. This is not obedience class, but if you later wish to take the dog to obedience class, the dog will do well if it did well on these programs. Making the adjustment will not be a problem.
- Do not chase the dog around the room to try to get it to comply with you. If necessary, choose a small room with minimal distractions and use a leash. A head collar provides even more instantaneous response. *Use head halters and other collars kindly.*

A sample sequence could look like this: "Bonnie - sit - (3-second pause) - sit - (3-second pause) - Bonnie, sit - (move closer to the dog and move the treat to your eye) - sit - (Bonnie sits) - good girl! (treat) - stay - good girl - stay (take a step backward while saying "stay" - then stop) stay Bonnie - good girl - stay (return while saying "stay" - then stop) - stay Bonnie - good girl! (treat) - okay (the releaser and Bonnie can get up)!" - (Bonnie happily gets up and watches calmly for your next signal.)

Note that you talk nonstop to the dog during these programs. This type of talking is not allowed in obedience classes but is desperately needed with inexperienced puppies and problem dogs. These dogs need all the cues that they can get. They need the constant guidance and reassurance of hearing your voice with clear instructions. These instructions and reassurances should occur in the context of shaping or gradually guiding their behavior toward more appropriate behaviors. You will have to learn to read subtle cues that your dog is giving and use these to your advantage. You will find it easier than you believe. The one thing that you absolutely *cannot* do is to talk a continuous stream to the dog without receiving the context-appropriate responses to your requests. If you rush through everything, you will only stress the dog and teach it to ignore everything you say. This is not good. A corollary of this admonition is that it is necessary to use consistent terminology and brief phrases and to do so in an environment when no one else is carrying on long, loud,

distracting conversations.

Do not push or pull on your dog or tug on its collar to get the dog to sit. These types of behaviors can be viewed as challenges by some dogs and may make them potentially dangerous. Use the methods discussed previously. If you really believe that the dog needs some physical help in sitting, use a head collar.

Do not wave your hands or the treat around in front of the dog. This acts as a distraction and confuses the dog. Part of the point of this program is to make the dog calmer and less confused. Excitable behavior on your part or unclear signals can make your dog more anxious. This does not help.

It is important to be calm. Your dog will make mistakes. This does not reflect on you. Problem dogs and new puppies require a lot of patience. The people who have had the most success with these protocols have been those who work the hardest and most consistently.

Do not let your dog be a jack-in-the-box. You must control the situation, and you must achieve that control by convincing the dog to defer to you. If the dog gets up to get the treat every time it is offered, the *dog* just controlled the situation. If the dog does this, consider whether you were too far away from the dog when you offered the treat. If so, move closer. Ideally, the dog should be able to get the treat just by stretching its neck. The dog should not need to get up. If you have a small dog, this may mean that you need to squat down to offer the reward. Be careful if the dog is aggressive because your face is now close to the dog. If you are close enough for the dog to do the exercise properly and the dog still gets up, close your hand over the treat and say "No." One advantage of holding the treat in this manner is that you can safely deny the dog the treat as the last second if the dog acts inappropriately. Then ask the dog to sit again. After the dog sits, say "Stay," wait 3 to 5 seconds, say "Stay" again, and *then* give the treat. The two "stays" with the period between them will reinforce the dog that it cannot get up when it wants to-the dog must be released. By asking the dog to stay twice, you are telling it that whenever it makes a mistake, it must do two things to recover from it. A sample sequence follows:

"Susie - sit - (3 to 5-second pause) -sit- (Susie sits) -good girl! - stay (start to give treat and dog gets up) - no! - (close hand over treat) -sit- (Susie sits) - stay - (3 to 5-second pause) - stay - good girl! - stay - (give treat) - okay!" (Dog is now allowed to get up and does so.)

Do *not* tell the dog that it is good if it is not. Do *not* reward shaking, growling, whining, or any other behavior that may be a component of the behavior you are trying to correct. If the dog gets impatient and barks for attention, say "No! Quiet! - stay - good girl - stay - good girl - (treat) -stay. . . ." If a vocal command is not sufficient to quiet the dog, remember that a head collar (especially the Gentle Leader/Promise) can be pulled forward to close the mouth and abort the bark before it starts, so that your correction is the most appropriate possible.

Finally, if you accidentally drop a food treat and the dog gets up to get it, do not correct the dog (the dog did not make the mistake and you did not deliberately drop the treat). Just start at the last point.

The Protocol

The protocol is a program that was designed so that your dog could learn from it without becoming stressed and without learning to ignore the tasks because they were too predictable. The protocol intersperses long activities with short ones. You may have to adjust some activities to your particular needs. The pattern is actually spelled out in the program. It is preferable to reward the dog *only* for performing each task perfectly. If this is not possible for your dog, you can use a "shaping" procedure in which you first reward the dog for a behavior that approaches that indicated in the task. The next time you do the task, the behavior *must* be closer to perfect to be rewarded. If the program is done correctly, your dog will perform the task perfectly within a short time.

The protocol is a foundation for desensitizing and counterconditioning your dog to situations in which it reacts inappropriately. The pages can be used as one day's tasks, or you may proceed at the dog's pace (which may be faster or slower). Some exercises are weird (asking you to run in circles or talk to people who do not exist), but these can be very helpful in getting dogs to learn to relax in a variety of circumstances. Before you start the actual exercises, you must practice with the dog so that it can sit perfectly for 15 seconds without moving. Do this with food treats as described previously. Once your dog can sit this way and look happy and as if it worshipped the ground you walk on, you are ready for the more challenging stuff.

Theoretically the tasks are grouped in 15- to 20-minute units. Your dog may have to go more slowly or may be able to go quickly. This is not a race, and people who push their dogs too quickly create *additional anxiety problems!* Watch your dog's cues. Once the animal can sit for 15 seconds perfectly, reward it only when it approaches perfect behavior or perfection on the other exercises. Use the shaping behaviors discussed previously if needed. If the dog really cannot perform an exercise or task, return to one that the dog knows flawlessly, reward the perfect performance, and stop. Every member of the family is to work 15 to 20 minutes per day with the dog, but it may be less anxiety provoking and more stimulating for the dog if this is done in three or four 5 minute segments.

If everyone in the family cannot or will not work with the dog, the people who are not participating *must not* sabotage the program. They minimally must comply with "The Protocol for Deference." If they cannot or will not do this, they should not be interacting with the dog at all. If there is a problem with non-cooperation in the household, the dog will not behave as well as it can.

Remember that the keys to success are consistency and appropriate rewards. This means that, although we want you to work 15 to 20 minutes once or twice per day, you should work only for as long as both you and the dog are enjoying and benefiting from the program. If this means that you use six 5-minute intervals to accomplish three or four of the tasks, that is fine. Please do not end on a bad note. If the dog's behavior is deteriorating or its attention is dissipating, do one final, fun, easy exercise and stop. By pushing the dog past its limits, you induce anxiety, and the dog back-slides.

When the dog is able to perform all of the tasks and exercises both on and off lead in one location (the living room), repeat them all in other rooms and circumstances (the back yard or the park - use a lead here). When the dog performs all the tasks perfectly in all places with all household members, you are ready for Tier 2 of the protocols, which focuses on

your dog's specific problems.

If at any point you cannot get past one task, try breaking that task into two or three component parts. If this still does not help, call the veterinarian who recommended the program and who is working with the dog's behavior problems. He or she will be able to help you determine the root of the problem. Please do not just continue accepting suboptimal responses. The goal is to improve your dog's behavior. Videotaping while you work with the dog can help. Not only can you show the veterinarian what you are doing, but also you can be a more objective critic of your approach if you are not also an active participant.

Finally, remember that the dog will give you lots of cues about how it feels. We are rewarding the physical changes associated with relaxation and happiness and so will also reward the underlying physiological states associated with this (parasympathetic part of the autonomic nervous system). This means that if the dog is relaxed, its body is not stiff, the jaws hang relaxed and are not tense, the ears are alert or cocked but not rigid, its head is held gently at an angle, and the eyes are calm and adoring, you will be rewarding the nervous system responses that help your dog learn. If you mistakenly reward fear, tension, aggression, or avoidance, you will not make as much progress. If it is easier for you and the dog to be relaxed if the dog is lying down, do that.

Good luck, and do not get discouraged. Many dogs go through a period of 3 to 7 days when their behavior gets worse before it improves. For the first time in their life the dogs have a rule structure they must follow, and they get frustrated while learning it. As they discover they are rewarded for being relaxed and happy, their behavior will improve. These programs are more difficult for the people, in many ways, than they are for the dogs. Stick with it!

PROTOCOL TASK SHEETS

The task is listed on the left. To the right is a space for your comments about the degree of difficulty of the task for the dog, how many times it had to be repeated, or other questionable behaviors that appeared during the task. You should discuss these with your veterinarian at the reexamination appointment.

Remember after each task to verbally praise the dog and reward it with a treat for perfect performance before going on to the next task. Each set of exercises is designed for a day or a block of time. Warm-up and cool-down periods are provided.

At the first sign of any anxiety (lips retracted, pupils dilated, head lowered, ears pulled down and back, trembling, scanning), return to an exercise with which the dog is more comfortable or break down the exercise that produced these behaviors into smaller steps.

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Level 1: Dog's Task	
Sit for 5 seconds	
Sit for 10 seconds	
Sit while you take 1 step back and return	
Sit while you take 2 steps back and return	
Sit for 10 seconds	
Sit while you take 1 step to the right and return	
Sit while you take 1 step to the left and return	
Sit for 10 seconds	
Sit while you take 2 steps back and return	
Sit while you take 2 steps to the right and return	
Sit for 15 seconds	
Sit while you take 2 steps to the left and return	
Sit while you clap your hands softly once	
Sit while you take 3 steps back and return	
Sit while you count out loud to 10	
Sit while you clap your hands softly once	
Sit while you count out loud to 20	
Sit while you take 3 steps to the right and return	
Sit while you clap your hands softly twice	
Sit for 3 seconds	
Sit for 5 seconds	
Sit while you take 1 step back and return	
Sit for 3 seconds	
Sit for 10 seconds	
Sit for 5 seconds	
Sit for 3 seconds	