Training Plan: Look At That (LAT)

Why this is useful for your dog to know: Some dogs go ballistic (barking, lunging and generally freaking out) on leash when they see something exciting or scary. Although a lot of dogs display reactive behavior, it can be embarrassing at best and dangerous at worst. Implementing this "look at that" training plan will help dogs stay calm and safe in these situations.

End behavior: The dog will look at the trigger (whatever she is reactive toward) and then look back at the handler.

Step 1: Decide on a sound, word or visual marker that you'll use to indicate to your dog that she's doing something great and a treat will follow. Clickers and a verbal "yes" or "good" are popular markers.

Step 2: To teach your dog that the marker always means a treat is coming, click the clicker or say the word and then give her a treat immediately. Do this repeatedly, until she looks expectantly at you whenever you use the marker.

Step 3: Next, with the dog on leash, stand at a distance from the trigger. You should be far enough away that your dog sees her trigger but isn't reacting. As soon as she looks at the trigger, use your marker. She should turn toward you in anticipation of the treat. When she does, give her the treat. Repeat 10-15 times.

> Tip: If she does not turn toward you, either go back to Step 2 or increase the distance between her and the trigger.

Step 4: When she consistently looks at her trigger without reacting, test to see if she'll look back at you in anticipation of the marker and treat after she looks at her trigger. If so, mark and then treat. If not, repeat the previous step.

Step 5: Gradually, one foot at a time, decrease the distance between your dog and the trigger. Continue using your marker and treats if she doesn't react. You may have to shift between Steps 3 and 4 as the distance decreases.

> Tip: If your dog starts reacting, simply increase the distance between her and the trigger until she's no longer upset and continue training.

Proofing

Proofing means teaching the dog to generalize the behavior in different contexts.

It's important to practice LAT often with your dog. When you first start, you will want to practice in the same environment, someplace that is low-stress for your dog. If your dog is reactive toward other dogs, make sure that you are practicing with a calm, non-reactive dog as the trigger.

Once your dog is consistently doing LAT successfully with the other dog, practice with dogs who are progressively more reactive. Here's the continuum of behavior from non-reactive to reactive:

- Calm, ignoring your dog
- Calm, occasionally looking at your dog
- Calm, looking at your dog
- Calm, staring at your dog
- Pulling toward your dog
- Barking at your dog
- Lunging at your dog

You'll also want to proof the behavior:

- With different people handling the dog
- With different levels of distraction
- In different places
- With different triggers (e.g., cars, trucks, men, women)

Notes

Here are some troubleshooting tips:

- As mentioned above, when you start training LAT, you'll want to position your dog far enough away from the trigger so that she sees the trigger but doesn't react to it. This is called being under threshold and it may take a little experimenting to find that place. So, start farther away than you think necessary and gradually move closer to the trigger.

- If your dog is extremely reactive and you can't find a distance from which she won't react, ask your trainer about teaching the cue "look" indoors first.

- If a trigger comes upon you unexpectedly while you're training, and your dog starts to bark or lunge, say "let's go" and do a U-turn, moving away from the trigger until she's no longer upset. Once she's at a distance where she's not reacting, start doing LAT again or ask for behaviors she already knows until you have regained her attention.

If you get stuck on any step, stop and take a break. When you try again, go back to the previous step in the plan. If necessary, create intermediate steps with intensity and duration that your dog is comfortable with. Don't rush: Take it at the dog's speed. Keep in mind that it can take a long time to change deep-seated fears, so be patient.