

When Excited Becomes Rude

Clicker Training to Calm Your Dog at Agility Trials

By Emma Parsons

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Agility is easily one of the most fun and exciting sports that you can do with your dog. As you and your dog run the course, you both concentrate on the next obstacle, traversing up, over, and through smoothly, quickly, and seamlessly.

Due to the intense excitement of the sport, dogs especially those waiting to run, become highly stimulated. That stimulation can make many reactive to their handlers and to other dogs. Those dogs may exhibit behavior toward other dogs that you might not see anywhere else. They may thrust their face into another dog's face unexpectedly, body-slam neighboring dogs, or even lunge at dogs walking by. If your dog has the tendency to be "rude" when overstimulated, repairing his behavior may require several steps.

Step 1: Don't Rehearse Reactive Behavior

The first rule is never to let your dog rehearse his offensive behavior. Once he exhibits a behavior, work to avoid his repeating it. The more your dog repeats unwanted behavior, the more intense it will become. At a crowded agility trial with an overstimulated dog, the only way to prevent behavior may be to take your dog out of the environment. Be sure that you have a "safe space" ready and waiting: a crate, your tent, or your car (as long as the day is cool). Any place will do where your dog cannot encroach on another dog's space, and where your dog's level of stimulation can be controlled and reduced. It is also wise to teach your dog to perform a sit-stay behind you, so that in an emergency, you can move out in front of your dog to manage the environment while he stays safely behind.



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Step 2: Condition an Alternate Behavior

Before attending an agility trial, use clicker training's mark and reward process to teach your dog an alternate or incompatible behavior. If he tends to lunge and growl at nearby dogs settled in their crates, train him to heel past crates, with his full attention on you. Keeping him focused on you and performing a task for which he knows he will be rewarded keeps him calm and "thinking"—an ideal state of mind as you prepare to run your course.

A thinking dog cannot be a reactive dog. The reactive dog is running on emotion, unable to concentrate on you and your signals. A thinking dog can ignore everything in his environment

to accomplish the task that is filling his mind. With clicker training, not only can you teach your dog to be more tolerant of other dogs' "rude" behaviors, but by doing so, you can also change your dog's emotion toward these specific instances.



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Step 3: Desensitize Your Dog to Rude Behavior

If your dog is sensitive to the "rude" behavior of other dogs, you can desensitize him to it as it occurs. When your dog tenses up, you tense too. When you fear that your dog is about to respond with aggression to another dog, you probably tighten the leash and pull him away suddenly. That tight leash and sudden pull may actually become your dog's cue to react: *If mom is afraid, then there's really something to worry about.* Rather than letting your own fearful reaction contribute to the intensity of your dog's reaction, turn the event into a training opportunity.

Step 4: Recognize Your Stress Signals

You can also teach your dog that whenever you exhibit stressful signals, like pulling tight on the leash, that



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this is his cue to give you automatic eye contact. Think about what your body does when you fear an aggressive explosion. What are your physical cues? Do you stop breathing? Do you speak more loudly than normal? Do you pull tight on the leash, as mentioned in the previous example, or do you grab your dog's muzzle or collar? Identify each stress cue and start to work on each individually. To change the meaning of each signal, perform it in the company of your dog at a very low intensity, and click and feed your dog as it occurs.

Step 5: Train an Appropriate Reaction to Your Stress Signal

Let's take the example of the tight leash. Let your dog go to the end of the leash. Take a small step back. Click and feed your dog the moment the leash goes taut. Allow your dog to come to you to get the treat. Spend at least twenty seconds feeding your dog and telling him how great he is. Repeat this step several times. Now stand in one spot and pull up on the leash. Click and feed your dog for loosening the leash by coming toward you. Gradually increase the amount of pressure with which you pull the leash tight. Alternate between taking steps and standing still. As you continue to work this behavior, reinforce any eye contact that occurs. At the sensation of his leash tightening, your dog, anticipating the click and the treat, will look at you rather than react to an approaching dog.

As you increase the pressure on the leash, if your dog shows signs of anxiety, stop the session, and evaluate your current training criteria. Go back to the previous level of success and work from there.

If you have identified other behaviors of your own that may have become signals for your dog to show aggression, the principles are the same as described above. By clicking and feeding your dog while you exhibit your stress signals, you will change the associated behavior.



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Step 6: Use Dog-Dog Encounters as Training Opportunities

Every encounter with another dog is also a "clickable" event. If your dog reacts when another dog sniffs his hind end, click and feed your dog every time another dog sniffs him. Click and feed your dog for looking at you when any variation of the dreaded behavior of sniffing, or even approaching to sniff, occurs. Eventually, rather than exploding, when another dog approaches from behind, your dog will look up at you expecting a click and a reward: "OK! Someone is coming to sniff me. Time for you to pay up!"

A training session, with the help of another handler and a stable, non-reactive dog is an ideal way to work on this behavior. Click and feed your dog as the other dog approaches yours in a semi-circular fashion. Don't start by walking the dogs straight "into" each other, head-to-head. This is unnatural canine behavior, and can spark a dogfight instantly.

**Step 7:
Nose-to-Nose Encounters
Equal Advanced Training**

When your dog is ready for an advanced lesson, work on your dog's tolerance of other dogs moving directly toward his face. As the other dog starts to sniff your dog's tail, or hind end, click and reinforce your dog immediately, continuing to do so with a high rate of reinforcement. (Click and feed your dog for this interaction unless one of the dogs is food possessive. If so, click and praise or pat your dog instead.)

After a couple of repetitions, handlers call their dogs to them simultaneously, clicking and feeding for a successful session. (Put the end of the session on a release cue, *O.K.*, for example, so that each handler knows when to call his dog back.) Sessions can be very short,



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no more than 5-10 seconds long, and should continue only if both dogs stay calm. As you continue to lengthen the duration of the session, if at any time

either of the dogs begins to exhibit signs of anxiety, end the session and evaluate the cause of the reactivity.

**Step 8:
Remaining Calm Can Be Easy**

With a little advance preparation and awareness, you and your dog can stay calm even in the highly stimulating environment of an agility trial. The key is to remain in a thinking mode and allow no opportunity for reactivity, so that both of you can perform your very best. 🐾



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Emma Parsons has been helping owners and their dogs deal with aggression and reactivity issues, through the methodology of clicker training, for the past nine years. She is the Canine Behavior Consultant for the VCA Rotherwood Animal Clinic in Newton, Massachusetts and is also the Training Director for Karen Pryor's Clicker Training in Waltham, Massachusetts. Emma wrote the highly regarded book, Click to Calm: Healing the Aggressive Dog and also teaches Reactive Dog Classes at Masterpeace Dog Training in Franklin, Massachusetts. Contact Emma at CreativK9@aol.com.

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