

# THE ROTTWEILER - PET THERAPY

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In my practice, I have the opportunity to work with many dogs. Most of those dogs are happy-go-lucky, some are a little bossy, others a little stubborn, a few aggressive and some are shy or fearful. These shy or fearful dogs often present with wild, erratic behavior and are usually mislabeled by the public as "aggressive and mean". Owners suffer the humiliation of judgmental stares and verbal reprimands that they should "CONTROL their dogs". After many such encounters, they start to believe their dog is mean and that they do need to get control of it. When they come to see me, I tell them that there is no "controlling" a dog. The secret is teaching the dog "self-control". Their dog is lacking in confidence and all of its behaviors are founded in fear. Most people are shocked by this revelation because it is in direct conflict with what they have come to believe and beliefs are hard to change. To facilitate this change, I begin to interpret their dog's behavior from a behavioral point of view.

High pitched barking accompanied by continuous backing up or lunging on the leash is a ruse on the part of the dog to challenge a perceived threat. This is a primitive fight or flight response and because the dog is on leash, its only choice by default is fight. This demonstration is usually accompanied by a low tail set that is flagging vigorously from side to side. The dog will have its ears down and flat with the head cocked to one side. Or, if the head is straight forward, the dog's gaze will be off to one side with the whites of the eyes showing. Fearful dogs tend to avoid direct eye contact. These dogs are caught up in a continuous cycle of "fight or flight". Owners unintentionally reinforce their dog's fears by trying to leash correct the dog, yelling at the dog or even alpha rolling the dog in the face of what it fears most. This only shows the dog that in the face of what it is afraid of, its owner, its leader, has become unreliable. This then only serves to reinforce the dog's fearful behaviors.

In an attempt to demonstrate to the client how the dog feels when fearful, I ask them what they are most afraid of. Is their fear rational? Whether rational or not, they feel the fear nonetheless and it is real to them. I ask them to imagine being placed in the situation they fear most. Not only have they been placed in the situation by someone they trust, but they are also being held in the situation by force and any attempts to relay their fears are met with either a harsh verbal reprimand accompanied by a smack to the head or they are forced to their knees in an act of submission. How do they feel about that situation and how do they feel about the person who subjected them to that experience over and over again?

This exercise often causes them to feel anxious and agitated and they cannot imagine someone they trust betraying them in such a way. I then explain that this is how their dog feels when it is forced into situations that are beyond its capacity to cope. At this point I have established empathy and understanding for the dog and it is time to go forward with behavior modification exercises for both the dog and the owner to build a trust relationship.

I start with basics: hand feed the dog all of its meals, crate it when left alone, refrain from tethering the dog outside and do not allow the dog any furniture privileges. These are non-negotiable. Once these changes have been implemented in the home environment for a month, the process of behavior modification outside the house can begin.

All of the above non negotiable tasks are necessary to establish the person in the relationship as the leader. Hand feeding is one of the easiest ways to reinforce this transition. As the provider of the food, the person is automatically elevated in status. Crating the dog when you leave is a message to the dog that you are leaving and in order to keep the pack safe in your absence you are confining your dog to a "den". This also prevents the dog from feeling that he/she needs to guard or protect the home when you are gone, therefore taking an immense responsibility off the shoulders of your fearful dog. A strict no tether rule is for the safety of your dog. When your dog is tied outside, he/she is vulnerable to taunting and other forms of agitation by strangers and stray dogs. This will only reinforce any fears he/she may have. Suspension of furniture privileges is required because any physical elevation for the dog will only serve

to reinforce his/her false sense of leadership. Just like in the movie "The Lion King", only the leader stands on the highest elevated spot in the territory. After the month of structure at home, the behavior modification process starts. To help facilitate this, we will use a clicker and food to change the dog's behavior in situations in which the dog is afraid. People generally incorrectly assume that rewarding the dog reinforces undesirable behavior. Food is a key component in behavior modification because it is biologically impossible for any animal, human or dog, to eat and digest food and simultaneously have an anxiety attack. The food, therefore, acts as a buffer, keeping the dog at a lower level of arousal. Other benefits are that it acts as a distraction and gives the dog a reason to stop reacting and start focusing on something different; the food. Once the dog can connect the food with a situation that it finds uncomfortable, it automatically takes the edge off for the dog and begins to reframe the situation in the dog's mind. In this we are able to override the dog's normal fearful reaction to stimulus from fear, barking and lunging to food and safety.

First we need to condition the dog to the clicker in a place the dog feels comfortable. Their own home is preferable. To condition the dog to the sound of the clicker, the owner will click and feed the dog in quick succession 10 times. Hot dogs or garlic sausage works best. After this initial conditioning exercise, the dog is prepped to understand that the "click" means food is coming. Next, to develop a work ethic for the dog, we get the dog to do simple things that the dog will do naturally. For example, target a hand when it is held out, "click", and then follow with the food. This will get the dog to associate its behavior with the click and food. Now we are ready to put the dog in a situation in which he/she is normally not comfortable. The key is to work under the dog's threshold and build up from there.

At this point, the client brings their dog to my school and we begin to work on the modification of fearful behaviors. Training sessions at this point are short. Reliable results are only achieved through mini sessions to ensure the dog is not overstressed. To begin a session, the client brings their dog into the training area while it is empty. The client tethers their dog to an eye ring securely fastened to the wall. The clients secure their dog so that they do not have to juggle the clicker, food and the leash. This, in itself, puts the handler at ease.

Next, the client does some hand targeting exercises with their dog to remind the dog that it can work in a strange environment. Now we move on to an exercise the dog is not comfortable with. Many dogs are afraid of strange dogs, so I will bring in one of my dogs on leash. I remind the client to refrain from any verbal praise as the inflection in their voice will convey any nervousness or agitation the client is feeling. They need to let the clicker do the talking. The client now begins to click and treat their dog for looking at my dog. When done quickly, the fearful dog's usual behavior of barking and lunging can be redirected to the clicking and expectation of food. This begins the process of the dog looking at something it is normally afraid of instead as a source of food and reward. It is important to note here that the other dog used as a model must be non-reactive and act as though the other dog does not exist. In some cases, all the client dog can handle is a life size plush toy dog. As the sessions progress, the client dog is stationary and the model dog moves in parallel lines across the room from the fearful dog. Then we will switch and have the model dog stay stationary while the client dog moves. When adequate confidence is built up, both dogs move on opposite sides of the room. As tolerance is built up, the client rewards their dog by leaving the training area for a short break, then bringing them back in to build endurance. If at any time the fearful dog is too agitated to work, we immediately back chain and remove the model dog from the scenario. We will backtrack at this point and work on getting the fearful dog to focus on hand targeting again. It is always important to work the fearful dog below his/her threshold; otherwise we are only reinforcing the dog's fears.

The key to building confidence in fearful dogs is to have the owner build a strong relationship with the dog grounded in steady, confident leadership to enable the dog to eventually trust the owner in all situations. Many dogs will never be happy in certain situations, but they can learn to trust their owners and let the owner lead the way. When done properly, my job is to give the client the knowledge and confidence to help their dog navigate through life with little to no fear.