

Habituation & Counterconditioning: Visitors at the Door

No Visitors

1. Throughout the day play a recording of the knocking noise or doorbell at random times and ignore the dog's responses to the stimulus. Make sure that during this process no visitors appear, otherwise the stimulus will once again be strengthened. Ideally, leave a sign on the door stating that you are training your dog, and to please not knock or ring the bell.

2. Repeat at least 10 times daily. The dog's excitement level will begin to decrease because nothing happens when he hears the stimulus. Over time, the door-related noises should become no more relevant to the dog than the chiming of a clock.

Teach Place: At the same time but in separate sessions from the habituation of the stimulus, also practice, on a "place" mat or specific location.

3. When the dog no longer reacts to the stimulus (door knocking, bell ringing, door opening), evoke the stimulus right before putting him in his place. Repeat multiple times throughout the day. Over several sessions, the stimulus (door knocking, ringing the bell, opening, and closing the door) becomes paired with the dog going to their place and completing a Sit or Down.

4. When the dog is successfully going to his place consistently upon hearing the stimulus, begin generalization. Practice with the dog so he must get to his place from different angles, with different distractions, etc. Once in the maintenance stage of this behavior of going to his place when hearing the door-related noise, move to the next set of steps. ("Mock" Visitor)

Note: Do this exercise at every entrance where people enter the home so that the dog can generalize the behavior and understand that knocks and doorbells anywhere are of no consequence.

A "Mock" Visitor

1. Attach a 6-foot leash to the dog's collar or harness. The owner should hold onto the leash for easier control of the dog.

2. Have a friend (someone who doesn't live in the house) knock on the front door or ring the doorbell. Instruct them not to speak when you open the door. Go toward the door and ask the dog to sit down on their place next to you.

4. Open the door. If the dog gets up when he sees the person, close the door and start over.

5. After the dog has done the exercise 10 times successfully, move to opening the door and have the visitor say something. If the dog gets up, close the door, and repeat until he remains successfully in position while you open the door, and a visitor says something.

6. Next, open the door, have the visitor say something, and step in. If the dog gets up, have the visitor leave and close the door, then repeat. If the dog remains in place, mark the behavior and give the dog a treat. **Note:** At first, your friend might need to leave and re-enter the home several times before the dog maintains his Stay. During the next training session, she might only need to exit and re-enter the home two or three times.

7. Have your friend do these steps at every entrance where the dog is likely to encounter people entering the home. This will help him generalize the behavior and understand that visitors are not for jumping on. After the behavior is generalized, have the dog dragging the leash (not in the owner's hand) while doing this exercise. When the dog can successfully maintain his place after the doorbell/knock and with a visitor coming inside, while he is dragging the leash, nine out of 10 times, move to no leash.

9. If at any time the dog is having difficulty remaining in the Sit or Down, go Back and practice an easier version, such as just having him keep all four paws on the floor. Once the dog is successfully keeping all four paws on the floor nine out of 10 times, you can reintroduce place. Practice this exercise several times a day until the dog remains in the Stay at least nine out of 10 times when a visitor arrives.