

Integrative Veterinary Care
Thank You-That's Enough
Changing the Frantic Rush to the Door
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The number one behavior complaint that I hear goes something like this: "He's perfect except for the way he acts when someone comes to the front door. He barks and runs to the door and tries to get out around me. He won't stop no matter what I do. I think he just gets too excited." When I ask people what their response is to this behavior, the answer usually involves some sort of angry-sounding reprimand and a pushing/pulling/shoving match with the dog.

The first step in changing this scenario is understanding what is happening in the dog's head as events unfold. Your dog knows with absolute certainty that if he barks at someone long enough, they will leave. It may take two days, but they will leave. Think about it. This happens every day, with the mail man, the UPS guy, the meter reader, people walking past the house, even cars. Your dog is a very powerful person. It's even better when a sneak attack causes the person to startle before they leave – that's funny! So, someone comes to the door and your dog barks. If you are not there, the someone leaves. If you *are* there, you come to the door, all big and puffy and tense, yell something to the effect of "Shut up already!" and maybe grab the dog by the collar to hold him back or steer him elsewhere. The *dog's* experience is more like this: He goes to the door to warn the someone off. His message is quite clear – "I'm here! I'm watching you! If you're up to no good, you better go away!" Shortly after he begins his warning, his person arrives, demonstrating aggressive body posture and growling and snarling. The aggression then gets turned on the dog, who gets pushed/shoved/grabbed or otherwise handled roughly. This, to the dog, is a clear case of redirected aggression. We are afraid or intimidated by the more powerful person outside the door, who we cannot attack. Lacking the ability to attack the more powerful newcomer, we turn our aggression on our backup, our dog. The dog's message changes. It becomes "Go away! My leader is crazy! Leave before she kills me!" The behavior escalates, and sometimes results in escalation of the dog's response to the point of the dog biting the owner in self-defense.

So – how do we change this?

The process of training a more polite encounter at the door involves many steps that require commitment and time. It is also very effective.

The first step is to train the "place" command (see separate handout). Work on "place" completely separately from anything else pertinent to the door first. "Place" is simply "Lie down over there and be calm." While you are training "place," figure out how you will restrict unsupervised access to the front door during the training process. I recommend using either a baby gate or an exercise pen. Consider the anatomy of your entryway. If your front door opens into a corridor, a simple pressure mounted or hardware-mounted hinge-type baby gate will probably do quite well. If you lack a corridor, you may need to purchase one of the hardware-mounted gates with extension panels (I believe that Century makes one that has hinged extensions to allow a curved configuration). These gates allow access via a hinged door and are mounted to the wall with screws, and are actually quite acceptable in appearance. Exercise pens are less expensive than hardware-mounted gates but are less difficult for a dog to circumvent and lack the advantage of having a "door" in the middle.

Once you have the "place" command and a way to keep your dog from getting all the way to the door when you are not actively training him, you are ready to begin the real work.

Set up a "place," with a tether, somewhere that is away from the door (10 feet seems to be a good distance) and allows your dog an unobstructed view of the door. Practice "place" here a couple of times each day for a few days, just so your dog has the idea. Then set up your

training sessions. At first, it may be best to use family members or people who live with you pretend to be the guest. Put a tab leash on your dog – a short leash, 1-4 feet long, with no handle. Arm yourself with treats. Open the barrier at the door (leave it open). Wait for your guest to knock. If you are using people who live with you, send them outside, have them wait a minute or two, then come back and knock. If you are using people outside the household, schedule them to come over at a specific time, and wait for them to arrive. (It may help you to prepare yourself if they phone you from the sidewalk before they get to the house.)

When the knock happens, the dog should race to the door and alert on the guest. Wherever you are in the house, call out “Thank you.” Come to the door. Tell your dog, “That’s enough” and look outside to identify the “danger.” Grasp the tab leash as you offer a treat, then give your “place” command and take him to his mat. Attach the tether to his collar, give another treat, and answer the door. Your dog may promptly go ballistic as soon as you get to or open the door. That’s okay. Open the door anyway and stand there, pretending to converse with your guest, until your dog quiets. He’s tethered, so he can’t break his “place.” It may take an hour, but he will eventually stop for breath. As soon as he is quiet, go reward his amazing behavior with lavish praise and treats. If the guest is someone your dog adores, allow your dog to greet them as a reward. Release your dog, escort your guest out, and repeat. Repeat, repeat, repeat.

You have the pleasure of setting this exercise up as many times each day as you can. Aim for at least three times daily on weekends.

This is a difficult exercise to train. You are not only training your dog, but yourself as well. Your dog is learning self control, and you are, too. You are trying to modify months, sometimes years, of habits and patterned aversive responses. With enough controlled repetition, the eventual door –alert sequence should be: Knock at the door, dog barks, human calls out “thank you, that’s enough” while coming to the door – letting dog know that they appreciate the warning and are coming to take care of it. Dog quiets, and either goes to his place to lie down before being asked or when requested to. Human can then answer the door without interruption, and dog can supervise the interaction, ready to come to the rescue at the first sign of axe-wielding by the guest. Human can maintain the appearance of leadership by controlling the interactions, and dog can fulfill the canine duty of defending the homestead, and everyone can feel good about doing their job well.