

CAT CHASING (OR MILD DOG AGGRESSION)

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Here are a few ideas on how to decrease a behavior such as cat chasing.

First, with any behavior the key to eliminating it is to remove the reinforcement. So what's reinforcing the dog? It is the adrenaline/endorphin rush of the chase. Highly prey driven dogs are probably like humans who skydive and bungee jump, they get a real (natural) high from it.

So, is there any way to avoid that internal chemical reaction? Yes. Induce a different internal reaction. We can do this through systematic desensitization and counter conditioning. In humans, we typically use these methods for people with fears and phobias (another internal state), but they apply to this situation as well. If you can induce a calm internal state through the use of food, the dog cannot, at the same time, release stress hormones and neurotransmitters.

So here's how I'd approach it. First, I'd get a very hungry dog. Then, I'd have the best food reinforcers possible available (prime rib or garlic liver).

In counter conditioning, you want to change a reaction to a stimulus (cat). Rather than having the dog think "CHASE!" I want him to think "STEAK!" If he's thinking "STEAK!" he absolutely cannot also be thinking "CHASE!" at the same time. They're incompatible internal states. So my ultimate goal is to make the sight of a cat a signal to the dog that "STEAK!" is forthcoming.

I'd use systematic desensitization by constructing a hierarchy (from least exciting for the dog to most exciting). You need to start at the place where the dog is aware of the cat, but not very motivated to chase. I might start with a cat in a crate or box. The cat is brought into the area containing the dog and the dog (*and possibly the cat too! BPF note*) is given a rapid-fire click/treat (CT) session. Then the cat is removed and the dog is ignored.



I'd repeat this in short sessions (2-3 minutes at a time) until the dog looks at the cat, then at me for click then treat. Once this is successful I'd move on to having someone holding the cat and walking into the room with the dog, again having a rapid-fire clicker session. These sessions must be really fast and really constant. The dog shouldn't have time to think, just to swallow.

These are interspersed with removing the cat and ignoring the dog. The hierarchy may then move to having the cat on a leash and harness on one side of the room, the dog on the other. The click then treat sessions continue in the same way. Then maybe move to someone walking around with the cat, then running with the cat, etc. You never move ahead unless the dog is totally focused on the click then treat and ignoring the cat (except for quick glances).

You might then move to having the cat walk closer and closer to the dog, etc. If the dog alerts to the cat and starts prey behavior, you've moved too fast and need to go back a few steps. This procedure doesn't necessarily take a long time, but it does need lots of short sessions. You have to be careful not to move up the hierarchy too fast, or to skip steps. It also needs to be generalized to different cats in different locations. Soon, however, the cat has become the "STEAK!" stimulus and the dog is looking to the handler for food rather than starting a chase.

I've been working on something similar the last few days in an effort to integrate my new Papillion puppy into the pack (Lab, Golden, Corgi, 2 Berners). I take the puppy and one dog at a time out into the yard. The 'dog of the moment' gets lots of CT for ignoring the puppy, or for doing nice sniffles with him. Every time I take the puppy out I'm mobbed by all the others wanting to go out with us! The puppy is a signal for good things happening, not a threat or a nuisance (OK, he probably will be a nuisance, but he's awful darn cute).

I'd hate to take the opposite approach - waiting until someone acts inappropriately with the puppy and punishing the offender. That is dangerous for the baby, bad management, unpleasant for everyone, and the punished one may very well develop an increased dislike for the puppy (since his presence signals the onset of punishment).

We've been using a similar method for dogs with mild dog aggression and it has been very successful with a wide range of dogs. This WILL work, if done properly. It's amazing how powerful such a simple technique can be.

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Best Paw Forward note: An alternative method is to place the cat in a cat carrier or pet crate. Walk slowly toward the cat with your dog on lead. Click and treat the dog as long as he is polite. Turn and walk away without saying anything as soon as the dog acts up. Gradually you will be able to walk the dog closer. Click and treat for calm sniffing and quiet approach.