

Boroughbred Behavior Resources



Issue: Introducing a Harness

Dogs are keen observers, they notice the subtlest details of their environment and do not generalize the way that humans do. For example, a dog that meets a man will not generalize to all men. For adequate socialization, the dog will need to meet many different men (eg. tall men, short men, men with beards, men in hats, etc.) This concept is true for novel objects too!

Novel objects are quite simply anything that your dog has not seen before, either inside your home or outside on the street. It can also be items that are specific for your dog like a new harness, a rain coat or booties! Let's focus on these items for this lesson. They often pose a challenge for dog owners when confronted with acclimating (desensitizing) their dogs to new doggie gear!

The process of introducing your dog to novel objects is called desensitization. Desensitization diminishes an emotional response that an animal has to a stimulus after repeated exposure to it. But wait, we don't stop there! The process also involves counter-conditioning. Counter-conditioning is the process of replacing unpleasant emotional responses to a stimulus with a more pleasant one through the use of classical conditioning.

Ok, that covers the sciency details...now how do we do this? It's really quite simple but takes patience, and most importantly time. The slower you go with the process, the more successful you will be.

As an example, let's introduce your dog to a harness for the first time. Make sure you have lots of treats handy or you can also use your dog's kibble (as long as your dog really likes the kibble). Food and treats for most dogs are a very happy thing! You can use that to your advantage when counter-conditioning how they feel when a new thing is presented to them. Every dog is different and some may take longer to desensitize to new things. In this example, each steps may take an hour for some dogs and may take a week for others. Never rush a dog. If you notice discomfort in your dog or they are displaying clear warnings that they are uncomfortable, STOP. And go back to the previous step or end the session for the day. Always listen to your dog!

1. Take the harness out of the package.
2. Hold the harness in one hand and feed your dog in the other. Repeat 15 times.

Please note: for all of these steps, if your dog gets bored before you hit 15 repetitions, take a break and do the rest later. These steps are designed to be done over time to avoid overwhelming your dog. Training should always be fun for both you and your dog!

3. Hold the harness in front of your dog's nose, feed him them kibble. Repeat 15 times.

4. Slowly place the harness over their muzzle as if you were putting it on but don't actually go over their head. Take it off. Repeat 15 times.
5. Open and close the harness. Often dogs react to the sound of the click of the buckle. Repeat 15 times.
6. Loosen the harness so that it is easy to slip on the dog. Now with one hand slip the harness over the dog's head and at the same time feed them treats so that it is happening at the same time. Repeat 15 times.
7. Slide the harness over your dog's head, using treats too! Let it rest on their body, take your hand away. Then slip it back off. Repeat 15 times.
8. Slide the harness over the head and this time clip it so that it is now on the dog. Use your treats. Then take it off. Repeat 15 times.
9. Now, let's adjust it to fit! By this time your dog should be desensitized to the harness and happy to stand there while you adjust it to fit appropriately. Remember, keep offering treats!
10. Go for a walk!

If you need more help:

Seek out a consultation with a professional, certified behaviorist or a certified dog trainer.

Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers: <http://www.ccpdt.org>

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: <http://corecaab.org>