The Hide Yourself Shaping Game: A Procedure for Changing Separation Distress Behaviors in Dogs

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Separation distress involves distress-related behaviors associated with social (and sometimes place) isolation and causes significant suffering in both dogs and humans. The current recommended approach to changing separation distress in dogs is generally a comprehensive behavior change program involving systematic desensitization, often with use of psychotropic medication prescribed by a veterinarian. In some behavior change programs, the dog is trained to maintain a specific position while the human leaves the room, starting for short durations and building up to longer durations. Although this can be a useful protocol, it does not emphasize counterconditioning or empowerment as strongly as it could. The Hide Yourself Shaping Game described here is intended as an adjunct to, or component of, a comprehensive behavior change program, one that emphasizes counterconditioning, empowerment, and learned industriousness, as well as resilience to minor frustrations.

Empowerment is similar to the concept of self efficacy. It refers to the confidence an animal experiences from having control over what happens to them. *Industriousness* is a behavior analytic term, similar to the concept of creativity. Free shaping—that is, shaping without prompts—tends to promote industriousness because the experimental strategies are strengthened and generalized. Similarly, free shaping tends to promote resilience as each minor frustration challenge (extinction trial during free shaping) is overcome. It immunizes the learner against frustration if done well (if done poorly, it achieves the opposite, so great care must be taken).

The Hide Yourself Shaping Game consists of shaping hiding behaviors. It allows the trainer to achieve counterconditioning and empowerment at the same time as addressing specific behaviors that will aid in the behavior change program. In other words, it will help promote generalization because of the natural application of the behavior to the problem situation. Instead of departure eliciting panic, it will come to cue a specific behavior with a strong reinforcement history and strongly meeting the contingency criterion, the byproduct of which is counterconditioning and industriousness/resilience.

It is critical that the following procedure elicits a "joy" attitude in the dog—that is, presence of pleasure-related behaviors and absence of distress-related behaviors. With each increase in the described criteria of the Hide Yourself Shaping Game, it is critical that the dog exhibits joy and relaxation-related behaviors, and that the game remains fun for everyone throughout the process. If the dog, at any point, exhibits stress-related behaviors, the trainer will need to lower criteria by as many approximations as necessary to recover the joy-related behaviors, and resolve to work more gradually and incrementally. Once the dog exhibits joy-related behavior, the criteria can be raised again, gradually and incrementally. The most efficient way to maintain the joyful attitude is to raise criteria in tiny increments and never raise them until the joy response is stable. The most efficient way to accomplish this training is to have patience, enjoy the process and go slowly, allowing the dog rather than the trainer to set the pace.

Consultants need to advise clients that they are coaching on implementing this procedure about how important it is to proceed to the next approximation only when the dog displays the appropriate joyful attitude, and explain the concept of tiny approximations. Where clients will be trained to carry out the shaping themselves, ensure that they develop a strong repertoire of training behaviors for free shaping, including handling frustration by setting smaller increments and using a prompt where necessary. Help them construct the incremental steps in the shaping process. Avoid simply providing them with the basic principles and leaving them to it. This is ineffective supervision. Coach the clients on shaping in general and on constructing this specific set of approximations. Have them demonstrate the behaviors you coach them in, and ensure they are developing adequate competency. They should also be coached on recognizing subtle stress-related behaviors. Shaping is an advanced skill. If done well, it can achieve the benefits described above, but if done poorly it can have the opposite effect. Again, as with any procedure that you hope a client will be able to perform independently, demonstrate the requisite behaviors, have them practice and demonstrate the behaviors, adjust any mistakes, and only leave them to carry out the tasks independently once they have demonstrated competence. Furthermore, continue to monitor the data they collect on the behaviors they are training. If the client cannot independently carry out the program, the consultant will need to perform the training, at least to the point where the client can then carry on independently. As the second author always says, treat clients like dogs. That is, set them up for success and reinforce desirable approximations.

If the guardian will be leaving the dog alone during the behavior change program and distress behaviors will result, they should immediately start to ensure that the dog cannot view the guardian leaving through the departure door, in preparation for applying the training to that door. Whether this is possible or not, using a salient nonsafety cue for departures that will elicit distress is a wise idea to help protect the conditioning when the intolerable departure will not take place and training will.

Hide Yourself Shaping Game

The Goal

The goal of the Hide Yourself Shaping Game is that the distressed dog will go and hide when the owner is at the door preparing to depart. Note that you can make early predeparture cues set the occasion for the game behaviors. Doing so will require only a minor adjustment to transfer stimulus control near the end of the training process. Thus, the behavior that generally elicits the most anxiety will have become a fun game.

The Hide Yourself Shaping Game will ideally help a dog develop a strong positive reinforcement history with the specific stimuli that currently elicit distress. Current established training practices involve implementation of systematic desensitization procedures and rarely involve operant conditioning procedures. Relaxation is promoted, a hierarchy of exposure to the departure routine is constructed, and counterconditioning is achieved at each increment. Although this has been a successful approach, including an operant component can physiologically focus the learner on an actual task, keeping them "operant," and inhibiting problem emotional responses (see Arnsten, 1998; Lindsay, 2000, p. 112). When an operant approach is implemented, it usually involves sit-and down-stay training, which usually allows for visual perception of the departure routine, which continues to elicit anxiety and panic. It is our goal to achieve both respondent and operant conditioning at the same time and to encourage more fun in the process. Promoting joy can only help the process. Playfulness is incompatible with distress. More importantly, current protocols do not incorporate training that results in the dog offering the actual departure behavior that will be needed, making generalization to the natural environment a source of setbacks. Ultimately, the dog offering the departure behavior should come to prompt a joyful or relaxation-related emotional response. Trick training often also elicits a joyful attitude in the trainer, and this is of critical importance to promoting success within the team.

Equipment

- 1 clicker or other conditioned reinforcer
- Many different treats that the dog will like to work for
- 1 exercise pen
- 1 soft and comfortable mat for the dog
- 1 Kong®
- KongTime® Automatic Treat Dispenser, the Premier MannersMinder™ or another automatic treat-dispensing product
- Cardboard box, or other large object that obstructs the dog's view of the trainer

The Game

Go to Mat and Relax

Start by training the dog to go to a mat and lie on it in a relaxed manner. McDevitt (2007) outlines numerous games for shaping and creating a joyful mat attitude. She describes in detail how to train a dog to lie on a mat and behave relaxed. Behaviors must be monitored carefully during all training because stress-related behaviors are indications that training is progressing too quickly. Again, the most efficient way to achieve success is to go slowly so that the dog sets the pace, not the trainer or the guardian. By shaping going to a mat with a high rate and magnitude of reinforcement, the trainer is making the mat a "happy place" to be. In addition, the dog should associate the mat with relaxation. Being on to his or her mat will be reinforcing. The mat serves as a target of where the dog goes to "hide." Furthermore, the mat will elicit calm and relaxed behavior because it has been previously associated with safety and reinforcers.

Hiding Behind Box

We start with training around a box rather than wall, entrance or hallway corner because the box is less likely to elicit problem emotional responses than an architectural feature. Once the behavior is trained with the box, it will have a strong reinforcement history and this will promote a smoother transition to architectural features in the home. Begin the hiding component of the game by reinforcing moving toward the box, and continue the shaping process until the dog is hiding behind the box. The box object needs to be large enough for the dog to tuck behind so that he or she is unable to see the trainer. When delivering treats, toss the treats behind the box so that the dog does not have to return to you to get the treat. If the dog is particularly successful, end the session by clicking and giving the dog a stuffed Kong® to consume while he or she is behind the box. If the dog takes the toy elsewhere, you may wish to attach it to the area behind the box to ensure the dog remains there to enjoy the stuffed Kong®.

Building Duration

You will have already trained the dog to go to, lie down on and remain on the mat. The down should be a relaxed down, meaning the dog is lying either on their side or has rolled their hips so that they look comfortable and are able to hold the position comfortably for a longer time.

Once hiding behind the box is shaped, begin building duration. The behavior should now be established and brought under stimulus control with a specific cue. The consultant now builds duration into the behavior so the dog begins offering hiding for longer periods in a "ping pong" manner—that is, the duration is not always predictable. Do this by incrementally and very slightly delaying your reinforcement after you have shaped lying down and relaxing behind the box. Keep the duration variable around an incrementally increasing mean duration.

Combining Mat Training with Box Hiding

Place the mat behind the box, and shape hiding from view of the trainer by having the dog tuck himself or herself behind the box and lying down on the mat. Add duration to the behavior so that, ultimately, the dog is able to perform this behavior of hiding from view and lying relaxed on the mat for minutes at a time.

Taking it to the Door

Next, combine the foundation training with an actual door. Do this by using an interior doorway instead of a box to repeat the game. The foundation established with the box will make working through doorway training

smoother, with fewer setbacks. Remember to relax other criteria and build the behavior back up. Avoid using any door that is associated with actual departure; use a neutral door that does not elicit emotionality. Ultimately, you want to apply this training to the departure door, but it is important to work up to that gradually in order to help establish counterconditioning and a strong reinforcement history for the game. If available, a doorway without a door is ideal. A doorless room entry is least likely to elicit anxiety because it is less like the departure door stimulus package and hence less likely to have an anxiety or panic response generalized to it. Alternatively, an interior doorway that usually has the door ajar is also a good choice. Often, a good choice is a bathroom door.

Begin with the trainer and the dog together at the doorway. Shape the target behavior of the dog walking away from the doorway and hiding behind something close by. This can be a hallway corner, another doorway or a piece of furniture. The key is that they go and hide. Start with no door or with a door that is wide open. Gradually, generalize the behavior to doorways with doors and/or doorways with doors being closed; that is, the door starts open but gradually is slightly more closed with each trial. From there, work with the door closed and the hiding behavior cued once the trainer opens the door. As before, the dog's mat is located at the location where the dog is trained to go. Sessions are ended with the dog getting a stuffed Kong® to play with on the relaxation mat.

Once you have achieved this, work on building duration, again on a schedule of reinforcement that gradually increases the mean duration through repeated trials in a "ping pong" fashion, so that the exact duration is not predictable for the dog. Repeat this game with other interior doors, each time starting with a wide-open door and minimal duration, in order to promote generalization as well as empowerment and a strong reinforcement history for the game itself.

We recommend that you reinforce hiding on the other side of the door using an electronic treat dispenser that releases treats when a remote control button is pressed. A KongTime® Automatic Treat Dispenser or other automatic treat dispenser can also be used. If you use an automatic treat dispenser, it must be placed on the far side of the mat, away from the doorway opening. Peeking and searching for the guardian must be avoided, and this will help. You can train without this device, but it becomes more challenging, particularly later in the process when departure will be included. The reinforcement needs to occur without the guardian being present. Pairing reinforcement with the guardian's presence may be counterproductive where you have the opportunity to reinforce guardian-absent behaviors. If electronic devices are not an option, simply hiding the Kong® on the relaxation mat can function as a "jackpot" for the dog for training sessions involving only one trial and will set the occasion for the dog looking for it there.

Moving it to the Departure Door

Finally, move the training procedure to the door that is used when the guardian is actually departing. With such a strong reinforcement and safety history associated with the game, distress responses to the departure door will now be far less likely. The industriousness built through free shaping will also promote resilience.

Using exercise pens, the area immediately outside the front door is secured so that the dog is unable to get loose. Move the pen so that it creates a half circle around the outside of the departure door, big enough for the dog to go and hide behind the box. Ensure there are no gaps that the dog can escape through. If necessary, use chairs or other heavy objects to block the pen from being accidentally moved by the dog. If you have a large double-door anteroom arrangement, the pen will not be necessary (as long as there is room for the trainer, the dog and the box). The doorway is fully opened at this point in the training.

The next step is particularly important for cases involving very intractable emotional responses or where the trainer is challenged by the idea of working as gradually as they have to. If you train someone to carry out this procedure

and find that they are having setbacks or are failing to move as slowly as they should, shape their compliance but also set them up for success by incorporating more intermediate steps for them to work through. Some trainers can work with few steps as long as they are particularly good at working slowly and gradually enough. Others become impatient or impulsive, and providing more increments will help ensure that these trainers move more slowly. If the problem is particularly troublesome or the trainer does not move slowly enough, this next step of working first from the outside of the departure door is important. Otherwise, you may be able to go directly to working at the departure door from the inside.

First, the behavior is trained with trainer and dog starting outside the departure door; the dog is going to hide on the mat behind the box. Then, after that behavior is shaped through to generalization and increased duration, the locations are changed; the trainer and dog start on the inside of the door, with the dog going to hide on the mat behind some architectural feature nearby that will allow for hiding (as was done with the interior doors). Remember to relax the criteria when starting the training in a new location and build them back up. The Hide Yourself Shaping Game begins again.

Next, generalize to the door at various degrees of being closed, again, a little at a time to a nearly closed position, and finally to the closed position. Again, build duration before proceeding to the final series of graded training approximations in which the door is ultimately closed after the dog hides.

Provided the dog is exhibiting no distress, the training progresses to the terminal approximation: the trainer and dog are inside the departure door with the door opened (the exercise pen outside prevents escape). The dog is trained to go hide on the mat behind the chosen architectural feature nearby that allows for hiding. This approximation, finally, closely resembles the actual departure. A strong foundation established to this point was all in preparation to ensure that such a "hot" environment remains fun. If the dog exhibits any

stress-related behaviors, go back to an approximation that was well established and build more reinforcement history for the game. The dog ideally comes to love to play the game, even at the departure door.

Again, the trainer shapes hiding and builds duration using the mat, Kong® and automatic dispenser. Ultimately, the dog should be offering the departure behavior. Now that we are approaching the departure scenario, the approximations become finer.

The Doorknob

For many dogs with separation-related distress, the guardian reaching for the doorknob and the closing of the door are key distress-eliciting stimuli. Since the doorknob and closing of the door are likely to elicit the most distress, this procedure takes the time to build a strong positive reinforcement history with the guardian reaching for the doorknob and, separately, the guardian closing the door. Now that a strong foundation has been set with the departure door, it is often a good idea to relax that criterion and work another. In this case, touching the doorknob and closing the door can be worked on with the interior doors that you spent time establishing as part of the game. The trainer can build a positive association with doorknobs and closing of doors with the interior doors and then bring that association back to the departure door. This gradual process not only establishes a strong reinforcement history, which can aid in counterconditioning, but also promotes generalization. All of these incremental steps provide the solid foundation needed to work the most challenging environment—leaving through the departure door.

The trainer now reaches for an interior doorknob that is unlikely to elicit distress from the dog if the foundation has been established well. With every reach toward the doorknob, the trainer tosses the dog a treat. Once you get to the point where you can touch the doorknob, you have the discriminative stimulus you will want to attach to the hiding behavior. Now it is time to transfer stimulus control from the verbal cue for the game to the physical touch of the doorknob. Touching the doorknob becomes the

cue to go hide on the mat behind the chosen wall, door or piece of furniture. In order to transfer stimulus control, the trainer presents the new stimulus (touching the doorknob), immediately followed by the old stimulus (the verbal cue), which is of course followed by the behavior and reinforcement. After repeated trials, stimulus control should be transferred, and the old cue may be discontinued.

Perform the doorknob-cued game with other doorways in the house to promote generalization and, again, build duration. As the training nears the final stages, it is particularly important that the dog continue to enjoy the game, as the most challenging part is yet to come.

Closing the Door

Finally, repeat the game, but now actually step out and close the door while the dog hides. Do this very gradually, one inch at a time. Do it first on some interior doors and then on the departure door. Be sure to coach the guardian that, when working with anxiety and panic, the fastest way to get something done is to do it the slowest way; never move to the next step until the one before is solid. It is temping to move quickly, but this will cause more problems than it solves. Drive home for guardians that this is the most common make-or-break detail in behavior change programs for problematic emotional responses such as fear, anxiety or panic. If they move the door only a tiny bit at a time, it is likely that they will progress smoothly and with fewer setbacks. If they move the door too quickly, they will increase the dog's stress and very likely need to move back and redo several steps to repair the damage. Setbacks happen, but each one is an indication that not enough time and care were taken to establish a reliable foundation of conditioning.

Ultimately, when the guardian touches the doorknob, the dog should go hide on the mat and the person should be able to step out and close the door and maintain duration. If this elicits emotionality, then the foundation was not solid enough. The question is not whether to reinforce this behavior by coming back in; the right question is how to go about ensuring that the problem behavior does not occur. The answer is graded exposure and a strong reinforcement history for some other replacement behavior.

After training has been complete, discrimination training will establish touching the departure door as the cue for the behavior and no longer the touching of other interior doors. Remember to refresh the conditioning frequently and ensure that there are frequent opportunities to play the Hide Yourself Shaping Game because the extinction trials associated with discrimination training can be frustrating otherwise.

Conclusion

The central purpose of this article is to propose a procedure that will achieve counterconditioning and differential reinforcement of incompatible behaviors, and promote industriousness, empowerment and generalization to the departure of family members in as minimally intrusive a manner as possible. Other procedures achieve some of these goals, but the Hide Yourself Shaping Game is constructed to achieve all of them. The use of play in separation distress training is underappreciated and underutilized. Beyond its counterconditioning application, it acts well as a metric for anxiety and panic because a dog experiencing problematic emotional responses will not be able to play appropriately. Often, procedures are carried out to the letter except that the trainer is tense and the process is too much like a chore. The behavior change program, like all training experiences, should be fun for everyone. Think of it like a game. Just because you are working to resolve problematic emotional responses does not mean that training cannot be fun; in fact, it means it should be fun. Playful and relaxed emotions are incompatible with separation distress. As a component of a comprehensive behavior change program involving antecedent control procedures, this game can help build empowerment and independence in dogs, promoting a smoother behavior change process.

Acknowledgements

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