

Chasing Fast Moving Objects

Dogs often chase fast moving objects such as cars, people on bikes, and kids on skateboards. This behavior can stem from the fact that fast moving objects trigger a dog's natural predatory instinct. This is the same instinct that encourages dogs to chase cats, rabbits, and squirrels. Sometimes however, the behavior stems from fear. If the dog is afraid of the object, due to either a lack of socialization or a past fearful experience, he/she may be simply trying to chase the scary object away.

In order to stop this unwanted behavior we must change the way your dog perceives the object and then condition a new response to the sight of the object. To accomplish this goal we use positive reinforcement training (operant conditioning), desensitization (gradually exposing the dog to the object and increasing the strength of the stimulus over time), and counterconditioning (changing the dog's emotional response to the object).

Operant conditioning enables us to condition a new response by exposing the dog to the fast moving object and reinforcing any behavior except the old reaction (i.e. lunging, barking, etc.). We are essentially "shaping" the absence of the unwanted behavior. Using food rewards you will be able to communicate to the dog which behaviors are acceptable in the presence of the fast moving object.

In order for the behavior modification to work you must manipulate the strength of the stimulus so that your dog's natural instinct and habitual response is not triggered. We do this using distance. If your dog chases cars, you will start at a distance far enough away from the road that he/she doesn't react to the sight of a car. When you see a car coming, you will give the treat for any calm behavior, for example: sitting, looking up at you, or simply just standing there not reacting. Once he/she is calm with every passing car at this distance, you will move closer and repeat the process.

In the course of using this behavior modification procedure you will be desensitizing your dog to the presence of cars (by repeated exposure) and counterconditioning his/her emotional response to them (passing cars predict treats). By pairing a yummy food treat with the sight of a car your dog will soon offer a different reaction upon seeing the car - he/she will look at you for the treat. Because behaviors that are rewarded will increase in frequency, these new calm behavior around cars will eventually become his/her automatic response.

Once your dog is reliably looking at you when he/she sees a passing car, bike, skateboarder (because you have conditioned this response with treats), you can start asking for a "watch me" behavior. As soon as your dog sees the moving object say "watch me" and give the treat for the response. Over time you will wait longer and longer before you give the treat so that your dog must hold eye contact with you the whole time the object is moving past.

If your dog is very reactive (lunging and barking aggressively) to the site of the moving object a gentle leader head collar is recommended so that you can control your dog's movements in a human way during this procedure. Chasing fast moving objects is very self-rewarding to a dog - and behaviors that are rewarded will continue. Using the gentle leader you can prevent your dog from "practicing" the behavior and thus reduce the likelihood of internal reward. By preventing the behavior we don't like (chasing the objects) and rewarding the behaviors we do like (calm behavior in the presence of the object) you will eventually condition a new response.

Go slowly! This process may take a few weeks or a few months, depending on how engrained and habitual the behavior is in your dog.