

Eliminating Barrier Aggression

By Sherry Woodard

Please use caution at all times when working on behavior modification. It's important to establish a positive relationship with a dog; once you have that, you will be able to make good progress with behavior modification techniques.

Many dogs act aggressively when they are behind a barrier, such as a gate, fence, crate or car window. The following technique can be used to eliminate this undesirable behavior. It is not intended for use with a dog who acts aggressively on lead. For your own safety, do the exercise through a barrier with an opening just large enough for a treat to pass through.

To begin changing the undesirable behavior, you will need to change the dog's negative association with being behind the barrier to a positive association. Use these steps:

1. Equip yourself with food rewards. For safety, long moist stick treats are recommended. Put the rewards in a pouch around your waist so that your hands are free.
2. Take the dog to an area where you can use food rewards without interference from other dogs. If you have to work in a run, remove the other dogs until you've finished.
3. Begin by giving a treat through the barrier, even if the dog looks aggressive. Give another as soon as the first has been eaten; repeat until you've given five stick treats.

4. Then, stop and wait for 3–5 seconds; if the dog remains calm, give him five more



treats. If he becomes aggressive, say nothing to him; just turn and walk away.

5. If the dog became aggressive, move him to another area (behind another barrier) where he hasn't been practicing bad behavior. Give him five stick treats; if he remains calm, give him five more.



As you work with a dog, here are some things to keep in mind:

- Always use a calm, gentle tone while working with a dog.
- Keep sessions short – five minutes or less at first.
- Remember to take breaks; stop and take the dog out for a walk.
- Be patient, but optimistic! Progress may be slow, but it will happen.

Once progress has been made with one handler, start introducing different handlers in different locations to help the dogs generalize about the positive associations.

Sherry Woodard is the dog training and care consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission.

See also: Dogs and Aggression
Positive Reinforcement: Training with Praise and Rewards
Why I Use Relationship-Based Training