

Chaos at the Door Part 2
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While having lunch with a friend recently, we got to laughing about how foolish our dogs can make us appear during greetings at the door. The doorbell is often the starting gun for the ‘who can get to the door fastest’ sprint competition. Of course the dogs usually win, with their owners finishing a distant second. Our friend was describing how sorry she sometimes felt for visitors waiting at her door, as they listened to her dogs’ frenzied barking, her husband yelling at the dogs to SHUT UP and her screaming at her husband to keep quiet.

From the dog’s point of view, the doorbell is just about the perfect conditioning stimulus. It’s virtually 100% predictive – every time it rings, something happens. Mom and dad get up, and a new person enters the territory, to either be welcomed or threatened. Because the sound is so meaningful, it is easy for dogs to generalize their response to noises that sound similar. Many dogs, including our own, will sometimes bark at doorbell sounds from the television. We can even induce barking by saying ‘Come In!!’, without the doorbell preceding this greeting.

Problems at the door are varied. Some dogs are just overly friendly, exuberantly jump on people, lick them, and just generally want to be the center of attention. Others like to door dash, while still others have more serious reactions and are threatening or aggressive. Regardless of the behavior, it’s not realistic to expect success by working with your dog just when the doorbell rings. At those times, your focus is on the visitor, not on training your dog. You will have to set up training sessions separate from the spontaneous arrival of visitors.

One approach is to teach your dog to go to a specific spot whenever you approach the door. Pick a spot near the door, but out of the way, because it will be harder to teach your dog not to follow you to the door. Give your dog a visible target, such as a small rug, to mark the spot. Once your dog is reliably responding to this cue, then add the doorbell, but not the visitor. Recruit a family member to ring the bell, or use a remote controlled device. Your goal is to have the doorbell be the cue for the ‘go to your place’ behavior.

The final step is to teach your dog to expect that when visitors do enter, he will receive treats and attention if he stays on his spot. Enlist the help of friends, family and neighbors who are willing to follow your instructions and be consistent with your dog. If your dog is grumpy and unfriendly, additional procedures are necessary, and you may need the help of a certified behaviorist to help you devise and implement them.

If you want to learn more about handling ‘chaos at the door’, register for our hour-long teleconference on Tuesday, December 3 at 8pm. We’ll discuss these and other behavior modification techniques in more detail. Call 303-932-9095 or send an email to info@AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com to obtain complete registration information.