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When “It’s Okay” ... Isn’t Okay

By Diane Blackman, CPDT-KA

Picture this: You bring your puppy or new dog to the vet’s office or groomer’s shop – a place where he has never been. There are new dogs, new people and new smells. The dog cowers behind you, maybe even shaking a little. Your first reaction is to comfort so you reach down and pet the dog and say something like, “It’s okay” in a soothing voice.

Now picture this: You are out in public several weeks later and he comes to you instead of running the other way to play with other dogs. You reach down, pet him and tell him what a good dog he is in a soothing and happy voice.

While the situations are totally different, the from the dog’s point of view, he received the same reaction from you. Dogs learn by reinforcement. When they receive a treat, praise, petting or attention, whatever they did immediately prior increases in likelihood to happen again. By petting and soothing your dog in scary situations, you are actually praising the dog and rewarding fearful behavior.

So what’s an owner suppose to do when your dog is scared? Fear not! There are three keys to success in scary situations:

1) Reward What You Want to Continue:

Comforting is a uniquely human experience. Even a small child, learning to walk, understands he is receiving comfort when he falls. However, that does not translate well when we interact with our canine companions. Rather than rewarding fearful behavior, reward the behavior you actually want to continue. Instead of comforting him, praise, pet or reward your dog anytime he takes a step toward anything that scares him. Take the phrase, “It’s okay” out of your dog’s vocabulary list.

2) Stand Tall:

Another thing to remember is that whenever your dog is unsure, he looks to you for guidance. Rather than crouching down, which can imply your concern, stand tall and relax your body posture. Even if you are concerned about the situation, by assuming a relaxed and erect body posture, you will set your dog at ease.

3) Smell It

When something startles your dog, teaching him to go and investigate the object will help build his confidence and help him overcome things that scare him. Point and/or touch the object where it fell and tell him to “smell it.” Entice him with a treat or favorite toy. If the dog is too scared to come up and smell and/or touch the object that spooked him, reward him for any forward movement towards the object. Over time, your dog will learn to check out things that startle or spook him.

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