

Patricia B. McConnell, Ph.D.



# The Cautious Canine

How to Help Dogs Conquer Their Fears

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SECOND EDITION

PMC

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# The CAUTIOUS CANINE

## How to Help Dogs Conquer Their Fears

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by Patricia B. McConnell, Ph.D.

**D**oes Fido's barking at visitors make you a little nervous? Does Queenie run into the closet when you turn on the vacuum or cower when trucks pass by? Has your dog ever growled while you were out walking when someone tried to pet her? All of these behavioral problems are often symptoms of a dog who is afraid of someone or something. This booklet is for people who own and love a dog who has a behavioral problem that is motivated by fear. Some fearful dogs simply run and hide, but others can act out on their fears and cause harm. This program is designed to prevent that.

The method described here, classical counter conditioning, is a universally effective treatment for fear-based behavioral problems. This method can help many animals get over their fears, so you can use this booklet if your dog is afraid of the vet or a ceiling fan, if your cat is afraid of another cat, or even for yourself. (I used it myself to help get over a fear of public speaking!) To illustrate the method in detail, this booklet describes a treatment program for dogs who are afraid of unfamiliar people. If you want to use this program to treat some other fear, just substitute the relevant problem and go from there.

Will this program help any dog? This program won't help dogs if their behavior is not motivated, at least in part, by fear. There are many reasons why dogs don't act the way we want them to around strangers, so be sure to have an accurate diagnosis before you proceed. If your dog has nipped or bitten, it is essential that you first do short-term management by preventing any more occurrences, and that you begin a program with a certified applied animal behaviorist, experienced trainer or board-certified veterinary specialist in behavior. This program also won't help you if you don't have the time to work on it. I want to be clear at the outset that following this program to the letter takes a commitment of time and energy - how much time and energy depends on the severity of the



problem. The bad news is that it might take up to a year to truly re-condition your dog. The good news is that it's easy to do once you get the hang of it.

What following this program can achieve: This program can significantly change your dog's behavior if his misbehavior is motivated by fear. Following the steps in this booklet will help many dogs lose their fear of strangers and stop barking, cowering, hiding, growling, and in some cases, even snapping or biting. Imagine what it would be like to have a dog who happily wags his tail when the doorbell rings! Won't it be great when King tail wags benevolently at the painter, instead of growling at him from behind your legs while the painter calls his lawyer on a cell phone? Imagine confidently walking down the street and smiling when people ask "may I pet your dog" (or, more likely, when they don't ask at all!). No one can guarantee that all dogs will be successfully treated by any program, including this one, but the behavior of many dogs will improve if you follow the guidelines within this booklet. Just keep in mind that every dog is different and has a different potential for successful treatment.

Will this program ruin my dog as a "guard dog?" I sure hope so. Barking dogs can be a great deterrent to criminals, but a dog who is aggressive to visitors is like a loaded gun on your coffee table. It's true that your "guard dog" might bite a burglar and chase him away, but he's just as likely to bite your neighbor, your electrician, or the paramedics who come when you call 911. It's not fair to expect your dog to be able to distinguish between all the subtleties of human comings and goings, nor is it fair to have a dog living in fear of strangers all his life. I believe that if your dog has it in him to defend you in times of physical danger then he will, no matter how much he loves the UPS man.

The Goal of the Program: Right now your dog is anxious, for whatever reason, about greeting strangers. This program is designed to change his or her response to unfamiliar people from one of fear to one of relaxed happiness. Rather than thinking "Oh NO! Who's that?! What should I do?!", I want your dog to see an approaching person and think "Oh boy! Way cool! Here comes someone I've never met! Yippee skipee!" (Okay, maybe that's a bit much for a reserved Akita, but you get the idea!)

This program is different than "obedience training." In traditional obedience training you are asking a dog to perform an action, like Lie Down, Sit or Stay. When you teach a dog to overcome stranger anxiety, you learn to control a dog's

emotions. After all, it's his internal state - how he's feeling inside - that drives his behavior. Dogs are very much like humans, in the sense that sometimes their emotions can get in the way of their performance. They can't "just stop barking" because you told them to anymore than we can ignore our fear of public speaking and perform perfectly in front of an audience just because we "should!" Following the steps below addresses the cause of his problem behavior - his emotions rather than just treating the symptoms.

## STEP ONE: MAKE IT SAFE

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First sit down and write out what you need to do to insure that your dog can't possibly hurt anyone while you are following this program. This is not just for the sake of public safety, although that's certainly enough of a motivation. Avoiding trouble is also imperative for your dog's successful treatment. If your dog nips someone out of fear while you are teaching him to overcome his anxiety, it will be even harder for both of you to be relaxed around other people again. As you are teaching your dog a new response to strangers you must set up situations where the old fearful response either doesn't occur, or occurs at such a low level that you can easily change your dog's emotional state. This is as important for your emotional state as it is for your dog's. Dogs are brilliant at reading tension in their owners, and if you are nervous, your dog will pick up on it. Only you know your dog, but here are some general tips that help a lot of dog owners:

1. Physically prevent contact between your dog and unfamiliar people when you can't manage the interaction in a **SAFE** and **RELAXED** manner.

For example, say you're in a hurry, it's the UPS man at the door (who hates dogs, and vice versa) and it's really not the time for a mellow training session. Grabbing your dog by the collar while anxiously yelling "Sit! NO! Duke, Sit Down!" is teaching Duke to be even more anxious about visitors. You are better off to avoid this situation by teaching your dog to go into another room, behind a closed door or sturdy gate, before you open the front door to visitors.

Here's how you do it: Start by training this when it's quiet, with no visitors and no distractions. While you and the dog are standing beside the front door, give

the dog some signal, like "go to your place" and happily trot with him away from the front door into a back room. Then throw a treat or a toy stuffed with treats on the floor for the dog, shut the door for a just a few seconds, and then let him out. Repeat this until he's busily slurping up treats in the back room while you open the front door and pretend that there are visitors there. Eventually, practice with friends or family ringing the bell and entering the house until your dog willingly complies by going to his "place" when "real" visitors come.

If, by the way, you have problems with your dog at the door and you have other dogs, you are better off to work with just one dog at a time. Barking is contagious, and another dog can increase the arousal level of your trainee, so put your other dogs away when you are first working through the program.

## 2. Avoid crowded areas on walks.

If someone looks like they might come too close ("too close" is defined by your dog), simply walk to the other side of the street. If you can't do that, then be sure you always have treats or special toys that are guaranteed to distract your dog. Distract her by feeding her treats or a tossing ball up and down. Try speaking to her in a relaxed tone (Singing "Happy Birthday" works for me. Hard to be nervous when you're singing foolish songs!). Keep your dog's attention on you in a positive way while you move purposefully away from the strangers.

## 3. Some people find it helpful to condition their dog to a muzzle.

If a dog is muzzled everyone can relax, which is in your dog's best interests in the long run. However, don't just slap a muzzle on a fearful dog - that could just make things worse by scaring your dog and making him even more fearful. When life is quiet, perhaps before dinner time, start a game where your dog takes a tasty treat which is sitting inside a soft fabric muzzle. Don't attempt to put the muzzle on her, just let her get used to putting her nose toward the muzzle and getting a great treat when she does. Gradually put the treat farther inside the muzzle so that she has to put her nose all the way through (by now, you are holding the muzzle up in front of the dog's nose) to get the treat. After a few sessions of that, attach the muzzle behind her ears for just a few seconds as you keep feeding her treats through the front. Over the days and weeks, occasionally leave the muzzle on for longer periods (no more than 5 or 10 minutes). Don't let

her paw it off. If she tries to, distract her with your voice or by holding treats by her nose. Then let her have the treat when she's been quiet for a bit. Use the muzzle in contexts where you can't control all the actors, but neither can you isolate the dog. Muzzles seem offensive to many people, but they can prevent the very tension that precipitates an aggressive incident. Don't worry that this will give your dog a "bad reputation." It's just your way of helping him - and you - relax.

#### 4. Here's what DOESN'T work:

Standing beside your dog, holding him with your hands or pulling tightly on the leash while strangers approach him or try to pet him. Even if "nothing happens," your dog may be more scared of strangers the next time because he was trapped into an aversive situation. We humans tend to have a fantasy that if we're "right there" we can somehow prevent trouble. Take it on faith from me: you can't. Dogs are faster than humans, a lot faster. Your chance of preventing a bite by matching your reaction time to your dog's is zero, so don't get your dog in a situation where you think he might not be safe. Your job is to prevent those situations. Do that by setting up controlled interactions where you control how close others are to your dog - we'll talk about the details of how to do that below.

#### STEP TWO: WHAT SCARES YOUR DOG?

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The second step is to sit down and figure out exactly what elicits the problem behavior. Sometimes what scares your dog is very general, like anyone unfamiliar who comes to the door or anyone who reaches quickly toward the dog and tries to pet him on the top of his head. However, what scares your dog can be extremely specific -like the dog I just saw who, after being friendly for four years, began barking aggressively at teenage boys with baseball caps. In this case, there was reason to believe that the dog had learned to be afraid of a particular boy with a cap on, and that he had generalized this fear to all boys with hats.

Most "shy" dogs are not afraid because of some abusive incident, but because they are genetically predisposed to be afraid of unfamiliar things. Some new things are scarier than others. Shy dogs most commonly are afraid of unfamiliar

people; men more often than women (especially large, deep voiced guys); people with funny looking silhouettes (carrying bags, wearing hats, etc.); people who charge up to them; hands that reach over the top of their heads; young children who move and speak erratically, and people who are themselves afraid of dogs.

Be Specific! It's very helpful to sit down and make a specific list of the things that upset your dog. Be sure the entire family participates, because dogs behave differently with different people. The key to being specific is to understand that behavior is measured in microseconds and micrometers. An outstretched hand might elicit fear in your dog if it moves moderately quickly to within 12 inches of the dog's face, but not if it's moved slowly. The same outstretched hand might not scare your dog if it moves quickly toward your dog, but stops at 24 inches instead of 12 inches from his face. It's important to be aware of what exactly sets your dog off, because we need to start working with those same events at an intensity level below that which frightens him. We'll call the events that scare your dog TRIGGERS, or "the bad," since it is what your dog considers to be "bad," whether it's the approach of a big man with a hat on or a little girl on a bicycle. The more specific and thorough your list of triggers, the better chance you'll have of successfully treating your dog.

Specific triggers can become generalized: Do keep in mind that SPECIFIC events that initially set off a dog can become generalized: perhaps the most common example is the dog who feels threatened when delivery people come. It's probably not the uniform that bothers him at first; more likely he learns that people with uniforms are territorial intruders. After all, they barge in and dash out, never stopping to perform a greeting ceremony like a polite dog would. Since delivery people always leave right after the dog barks, the dog is reinforced for barking by the withdrawal of what makes him anxious - the intruder. After months or years of this, dogs begin to generalize: people with uniforms are territorial intruders who are best dealt with by aggressive barking.

One event can include many triggers: Imagine someone comes to the door and rings the bell. That single event well might contain multiple triggers that your dog responds to. If your dog gets agitated when visitors come, experiment to see what parts of the event add to her reaction. For example, after a few months of associating the bell with a stranger coming into the house, many dogs begin to respond just to the sound of the doorbell by itself. The bell becomes the "trigger" that sets the dog off and elicits fear and arousal, even if there are no visitors

outside. Triggers in our "visitor to the house" example could include: the bell ringing or someone knocking, you walking to the front door, you opening the door, your dog seeing someone standing in front of the door, a person stepping over the threshold and entering the house, a person speaking to your dog or reaching toward it. Once you know all the probable triggers that your dog reacts to, you can set up situations where you separate them out so you can work on them one at a time. If your dog has only a mild or moderate fear of strangers, you probably don't need to work on each and every trigger separately, but if your dog is extremely scared, or at risk of causing an injury, you must start by separating out each "bad" thing that scares your dog.

### STEP THREE: FIND FIDO'S PASSIONS

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Now you want to sit down and write out a list of what your dog loves. Note I said LOVES. You need to find something that your dog is passionate about, that she'll do just about anything for, AND that you can give to her in small units repeatedly over and over again. Food works well for many dogs because so many dogs love tasty treats, and because it's easy to chop food up into little pieces. When I say "tasty" I don't mean dry kibble or grain-based dog treats. I mean something your dog goes crazy over. My dogs enjoy just about any doggie treats, but they think meat was made in heaven, so that's what I use if I want to teach my dog a new trick. Meatbased products seem to get the most dogs' attention, but all dogs are different. Do your own choice tests and see if your dog gets electric over chicken, liver, hot dogs or, bless them, frozen peas. The right food can make all the difference. I see owners every week who say: "Oh, my dog isn't all that excited about food" while Fido is drooling buckets at my feet and turning somersaults because I ignored the dry doggie bones and got out my chicken.

Some Cautions About Using Food. If you are working with your dog often, you might need to cut down on his dinner. If your dog really loves his kibble, just use part of his dinner for the training. If you use treats instead of dinner kibble (which will be 95% of dog owners), decrease his dinner by 5 or 10 percent. I'd rather your dog gained a pound or two than bite your neighbor, but I don't want your dog blimping out so that you end up with a health problem. You can also compensate for the extra food by adding more exercise to your dog's day - lots of

exercise is extremely valuable for fearful dogs anyway, so it's well worth your time.

If your dog loves tasty treats, but won't eat during a training session, then you are going too far, too fast. Anxiety suppresses appetite, so if your dog refuses his favorite food, then you will know that you must rearrange things logistically so that he is more relaxed.

Food Isn't the Way to Every Dog's Heart. If you have an obsessive retrieving dog, then you can use tennis balls just as easily as food. Sometimes play is even more effective than food, since it's hard to be playful and nervous at the same time. Some dogs have no interest in objects like balls, but go crazy over squeaky toys. Spend time figuring out what your dog adores and what she is willing to work for. That will be the key to changing your dog's reactions to strangers. Every dog is different, so find your dog's personal passion that you can dole out repeatedly, and then proceed to the next step. No matter what that passion might be, we'll call it the TREAT or the "good," since we know that your dog loves it, and it has the power to make your dog feel good inside.

#### STEP FOUR: LINKING UP THE "GOOD" AND THE "BAD"

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Now you are ready to put all of the steps together: you've insured safety, you know EXACTLY what sets your dogs off (the trigger) and you know what your dog adores (the treat). The basis of treatment is to introduce the dog to a very low intensity of the trigger (so that he's not really scared yet) while he's getting a very high intensity of the treat that he loves. Always remember that you are teaching your dog a new response to a stranger ("Oh boy, who's that?"). In order to do that you need to avoid situations where the old response comes out before you can influence the dog ("Oh no, ON GUARD, stranger coming!"). You do this by keeping the intensity of the trigger very low. For example, a low intensity trigger might occur when you are out on a walk with your dog and a person approaches from a hundred yards away. A high intensity treat might be a piece of hot dog held right beside his nose.

Let's take the example above and expand on it. Say you've determined that your dog is afraid of unfamiliar people while you're out walking together in the neighborhood. You've noticed that he ignores people 50 yards away, begins to look tense when they are 20 yards away, tries to go behind you if they're 10 yards away, and has snapped twice on walks when people tried to pet him and he couldn't get away. If you give your dog a treat when the stranger is 20 yards away (and he's already looking tense), you may not teach him to feel good about strangers. So, at first you want to give your dog a treat right after he sees people 50 yards away. It might seem like a waste of time to give your dog treats (or play ball, etc.) in situations where you know your dog is really "fine," but this is the key to helping your dog: starting when you can insure that your dog associates feeling extra good with seeing unfamiliar people. For most fearful dogs, that will only happen if the stranger is at a distance.

Right after your dog gets the treat, change your walk such that the distance between you and the strangers increases. You might have to turn around and walk the other way, or go across the street (you might have been doing this anyway, but at least now it's part of a plan!). If they just get closer and closer your dog might end up getting scared again, and you've lost the opportunity to create a new association. Obviously these events need to take place where you have a lot of control over how close you are to other people. Avoid crowded places where you and your dog might get blindsided (I'll talk later about what to do when that happens though, life being what it is!).

A helpful way to think of this part of the plan is that you are training your dog's emotions, just as you have previously spent time training your dog's actions. Right now we are primarily interested in influencing your dog's thoughts and emotions, so don't pay much attention to whether your dog is sitting or standing, as long as he looks relaxed.

You can see now why it's so important to be aware of all the things that set your dog off. If your dog flinches when someone reaches toward her, start giving her treats when the person is 20 feet away, long before she'd get scared by any movement from the stranger. If your dog is afraid of the vet, then drive to the clinic parking lot, stuff Ginger's mouth with hot dogs and then drive away without even getting out! If your dog is getting increasingly agitated when people come to the door, start by tossing treats or toys just after a family member rings the bell. Keep up the treats when you open the door, but now the "visitor"



(one of your dog's best human buddies) should toss the goodies. It might seem silly to have someone the dog already adores go through this process, but it's actually critical to the success of the program. You are laying a foundation of associations (doorbell rings and YES! I get happy!) that will be essential later on, when real strangers appear at the door.

In summary, the first stage of treatment is to teach your dog an association between something that could scare them if it was more intense (if it was faster, closer, bigger, etc.) and something that you know the dog adores. You do this by insuring that you have at least some control over the triggers, and are well stocked with your dog's favorite treats.

How much of this do I have to do? The key to getting this to work is to create events, over and over again, where your dog learns to associate feeling great with a low intensity version of what scares him. The number of repetitions needed varies tremendously from one dog to another, depending on many factors. The degree of shyness of the dog (mediated both by genetics and early experience), whether your dog is an "alpha-wannabee," the number of exposures per week, and your skill and timing are probably the most important factors. Minor cases can require only a few sessions at this level and then you and your dog can move on. However, I've had clients who's dogs needed hundreds of repetitions over many months before we could even consider the next step. In general, the amount of time necessary correlates with the degree and duration of the problem. But every dog is different. Always be conservative, and err on the side of safety. There's nothing to lose by being cautious, and what's a few more weeks or months of training compared to many years of a happy and safe life for your dog?

Don't go beyond this stage until your dog clearly begins to anticipate something good happening when he sees a stranger at your predetermined distance. For instance, King might see someone coming down the street and look at you and wag his tail. Maggie might try to get the tennis ball out of your pocket. Once you get this kind of response, continue with this phase for several more sessions before moving on, just to insure that the new response is truly learned. Keep in mind that a response in one context doesn't always generalize to another. If Maggie is doing really well in a familiar neighborhood park, then move on to the next step whenever you are there. But don't assume her behavior will be consistent in another environment, like at the vet clinic. Always be ready to back

up a step when you change contexts.

What's critical at this stage is to condition your dog that big guys with uniforms (or whatever it was that scared your dog) are a signal that something really wonderful is about to happen. If the "good thing"-say it's a tennis ball-consistently comes right after the UPS man, then bingo! you've just conditioned an association between the UPS man and the ball. After you do it enough, your dog's response to the UPS man will become the same as his response to a tennis ball. That's why classical conditioning is so powerful - it's as though your delivery man becomes a huge walking tennis ball to your dog, because he evokes the exact same response.

#### STEP FIVE: INCREASE THE INTENSITY OF THE TRIGGER

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The next stage of treatment is to gradually increase the intensity level of whatever scares your dog. Always keep the intensity of the "good" as high as you can, while you create situations step-by-step where the trigger stimulus moves toward a moderate, and eventually high-level of intensity. Say, for example, that your dog is nervous around strangers while out walking, and you've gotten her extra happy and relaxed when she sees someone at 50 yards. Now you should start allowing her to get closer to strangers. How much closer always will depend on each dog, but let's say you've been giving Ginger treats when she sees people 50 yards away and it's been going great. Now start giving her treats when the person is about 40 yards away. Continue giving her treats until they get to within, say, 30 yards. Avoid the person getting too close (in this case closer than 30 yards), by moving you and your dog out of the stranger's path of travel before he or she gets any closer.

So it looks like this: you notice an approaching stranger, hopefully even before Ginger does. Give Ginger several treats while the person is between 30 and 40 yards away. Then, at 40 yards from the stranger, change direction so that he or she doesn't get too close and thus elicit the old fearful reaction that you want to avoid. Drop out the treats as the distance between you and the stranger increases so that your dog associates approach with good things, and withdrawal with no more goodies.

Don't consider the specific distances that I've used in this example as a prescription: most dogs can handle being much closer to strangers than 40 yards. The distance that you choose depends on your dog, and how fearful he is about approaching strangers.

If you somehow can't avoid the stranger getting too close, keep tossing the ball or stuffing treats into Ginger's mouth, keeping her attention on you with the treats. However, if she reverts to barking or to any of her other old habits, firmly and quietly ask her to sit. If she won't, stop talking to her and swiftly turn her away from the problem until she is capable of calming down and sitting quietly. Once she's capable of sitting, speak quietly and rub her chest with circular strokes until she's even more calmed down. I'll talk in more depth later about what to do when things don't go quite as planned.

Continue this process, giving your dog treats, or toys, or happy talk as she sees people, and before she gets nervous. Do this as often as you can, in as many contexts as you can. Remember that every time you change contexts, you are, in a way, "starting over." In each new situation, be sure to back up and insure that the intensity of the trigger is below your dog's threshold. Many dogs are worse in their own neighborhoods, presumably where they feel both threatened and/or responsible. In this case, start by walking the dog in other neighborhoods, and gradually work your way back to your own.

Have others start tossing the treat or the toy: Continue over the weeks or months having people get closer and closer while your dog gets treats as they approach. Once the people get close enough to do so, it's time to start asking them to toss the treat. Ask your dog-loving friends to help you out and pretend to be a "stranger" approaching on the street. You can also ask passers-by if they might help, keeping in mind to always keep safety first. Ask people whose faces look receptive, and avoid people who look busy, who won't make eye contact, or worse—who look afraid of your dog. You give the treat whenever you can, and create situations where others toss treats when you're sure it will go well.

I played this game once with my dog, Lassie. I got her when she was one year old and she seemed cautious about unfamiliar men, although she wasn't aggressive in any way. But since I knew that caution at one year can sometimes turn into aggression when a dog is three years old, I wanted to eliminate her cautiousness before I had a problem. I drove to a nearby small town, and sat on a

bench in front of the local cafe with a bucket of cut up lamb. I was on the lookout for friendly men who got one of those "what a cute dog" looks on their faces at 20 yards. If they did, long before they got within petting distance I'd ask them if they'd mind helping me out: "Lassie hasn't met a lot of men, and I want her to love guys, so would you throw these treats to her?" Note that I didn't have them feed her by hand yet, because I wanted Lassie to associate approaching men with feeling great. A fast approach by an incoming stranger and hand moving quickly toward her face, even to offer a treat, might have scared her a little. I tossed treats to the stranger, so that he could toss them to Lassie. This had the secondary advantage of keeping his hands busy and preventing him from petting the dog before she was ready for it! Sitting on a bench hustling men might seem intimidating, but eventually you have to find a way to have others throw the treats. Just to be sure to be conservative and only set up situations you are sure are safe. Friends are always best, but strangers can be helpful if you are careful to go only where you can maintain control of their approaches toward your dog.

Ready for others to pet your dog? Once your dog acts as though she wants to greet strangers, you are ready to condition your dog to enjoy petting. Fearful dogs can be panicked by an unfamiliar hand reaching toward them. Just the initial hand movement toward them can be an intense trigger for many dogs. For moderate to serious cases, you must divide the act of being petted into several steps.

First, be aware of the different parts of petting that might upset your dog. The events that scare dogs in this context include: a stranger walking directly toward them, looking directly at their eyes, bending over them, and reaching a hand toward the top of their head. Second, divide these events into individual steps, in the same way that you did above with "strangers" approaching from a distance. The best way to introduce petting (the least scary for the dog) is to have the approaching person turn sideways and put his or her weight on their back foot. Have the "stranger" drop a treat as they turn toward the dog, and repeat this action several times. Let the dog come to them and sniff their relaxed, unmoving hand, which opens only to drop treats. Again, the game is to keep the intensity level of what scares the dog as low as you can. Here's what some sessions might look like, with your friend Ken helping out you and your dog Duke:

Imagine that the first two sessions with Ken look like this:

- First, you give Duke a treat as Ken gets within 10 feet.
- Immediately afterward, Ken tosses a treat, having stopped at 10 feet and turned sideways. Ken is looking to the side of Duke, not right at him. Ken is talking quietly to you now, in a relaxed voice, but not to Duke.
- Ken tosses another treat to Duke as he steps forward another step toward you and Duke.
- Ken repeats this until he is beside Duke. Duke is breathing normally, with a relaxed open mouth, slightly wagging his tail from the base, looking up at you on occasion for treats. You observe no tense stiffness in Duke's body. He's breathing and moving as he does when he's happy and relaxed, so you decide to proceed. (If Duke looks tense, Ken should back up and toss treats from farther away.)

Ken gently drops a treat but continues to hold his hand down by his side.

- Duke lifts up his nose, leans forward and sniffs Ken's hand. Ken drops another treat.
- Ken drops 3 more treats as he turns, and he then walks away. You say: "Oh, too bad, no more treats," as if in sympathy, and continue your walk.

In both of the two sessions above Duke tried to approach Ken, and sniffed his hand with a relaxed demeanor, so you and Ken agree it's time to move on to petting. In the third session:

- Ken approaches as before, but doesn't produce a treat until he's five feet from Duke. Ken drops 5 treats, one after the other, while approaching closer to Duke. Duke sniffs Ken's hands, wagging with his entire rear end and looking relaxed but excited about the hot dogs.
- Ken holds his hand by his side and opens it up so Duke can take the food right out of his hand.
- Ken puts another treat into his hand and lets Duke eat the treat. While Duke is slurping up the treat, Ken raises his other hand about 6 inches toward the side

of Duke's muzzle or under his chin and then drops it back to his side. Ken repeats this three times.

- Duke continues wagging from the shoulders back, snorting and snuffling for more hot dogs, so Ken gives him a treat with his left hand. As Duke eats it, Ken raises his other hand up toward the underside of Duke's muzzle, stopping before he actually touches him.
- If Duke has had a serious problem in the past, Ken should continue repeating the above process and go no further for this session. If Duke has never been aggressive or severely scared, then Ken might touch Duke on the side of his head briefly while Duke eats treats from Ken's other hand. All the while, Ken is being careful to move slowly and to keep his hand below Duke's eye level.

This is actually much harder to read about than it is to do. Once you understand the process and know how to "read" your dog and thus predict his behavior, it actually becomes very easy. Keep each session upbeat, and again, always end long before you or Duke start to get nervous.

Don't hesitate to link up with a professional if you can't do this with confidence. One or two sessions with someone who understands counter conditioning may be all you need to do it on your own.

Safety first: If you have any knowledge that your dog might harm someone, it is your responsibility to insure that this does not happen. If your dog might nip or bite if things don't go well, you simply must take steps to prevent that from happening. Use a muzzle if necessary (you can slide treats through the front opening), and have only your own friends be the "strangers" on the street. Use only those friends who you can count on to do what you say - this does NOT include all of your friends, right?! Go slow, remembering that "too far, too fast" may not only get someone hurt, but will set you and your dog back too.

Don't fall into the trap of believing that you can use the leash to keep things safe if the stranger gets too close. This method has at least two problems: a tight leash creates tension and signals to your dog that this is a, well, tense situation. That's the last message you want to convey to your dog! Secondly, it most likely won't work. Your dog's reaction time is so much faster than yours that you simply will not be able to react until the dog has already lunged. So keep the leash slightly

loose (just a bit of slack is perfect) and use your body to keep strangers away from your dog if you have to. Guard against setting up situations where you HOPE you can keep everything safe - hope doesn't get the job done, and it creates a situation where you are nervous and your dog will pick up on it. It is essential that you role model being cool, calm, and playful, so be very sure your sessions are structured in such a way that you can be that cool, calm dog owner your dog needs.

Continue this routine, step by step, until the dog has overlearned the association between the trigger and what makes him happy. Always remember that in times of stress we all tend to "default" to our old habits, so continue this process long after your dog looks relaxed. Depending on your dog, the treatment could take only a few weeks, as it did with Lassie. In severe cases, it could take up to a year. For all dogs, I recommend never really stopping this conditioning throughout the dog's life - after your dog's behavior has stabilized, continue to be opportunistic, and have friends toss treats or balls whenever the occasion arises. I always ask delivery people to toss balls for my dogs whenever I have a chance. I've never had a problem with my dogs and delivery people, but prevention is so much easier than treatment it seems foolish not to take an extra second and ask them to toss a ball!

Keep in mind that each new environment or trigger requires going through the entire procedure from the beginning. For example, walking by one friendly adult man on the sidewalk won't condition your dog to be relaxed about two women and stroller walking by in a different neighborhood. Each situation requires its own intensity. For example, say a medium-sized, dog-loving woman arrives, who you know to be a moderate to low intensity trigger for your dog. She can enter two steps into the house, and then throw a treat, continuing this process until she sits down on couch and lets dog come to her. That is appropriate because your dog considers her a low to moderate intensity trigger stimulus. But a friend who is a tall guy with a beard and hat might be much scarier to your dog, so in this case you would have your tall, male visitor go more slowly. The bell rings, you toss the treats, the guy stands sideways at door, he tosses treats until King looks really happy, and then the guy leaves. Both of these situations could occur on the same day. The key is to be aware of what scares your dog a little, and what scares your dog a lot, and always work within the dog's comfort zone.

The worst choice that you can make, (and regrettably probably the easiest) is to start the first steps, forget the last ones and hope like heck everything works out OK. Take it from the woman who sees families sobbing in her office every week - deal with it now, because it's not going to go away and it will probably just get worse if you don't work on it soon.

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How long will this take? Hopefully it is clear by now why it is so hard to write out a single schedule that works for all dogs. What steps you take each day and how fast you proceed always depends on your dog and his reactions to each session. For preventing problems with a sweet but slightly cautious young puppy, you just need to be opportunistic during the first year of your pup's life. Take your pup with you when appropriate, go out of your way if necessary to invite over guests who toss food treats as they enter, and enroll in family dog training classes that use lots of positive reinforcement. Be sure to have the UPS man and your mailman toss treats whenever you can (have a can of treats right by the door, then you'll always be prepared). These simple steps will make a big difference in the life of your dog.

Prevention efforts or treating minor problems require little effort, but older dogs who have an established behavior problem require more time and more organization. Although it is hard to estimate how long treatment will take for any one dog, the process described above might require three to twelve months of work for a dog who is starting to act out on his fears. Ideally, during that time you will set up situations where people enter the house or friends pass by on walks 5 to 10 times a week. That sounds intimidating, but if you can walk each day in a place with just the right amount of people, then you only need to "organize" a few events a week. These "organized" events can be really simple. Say that you have a friend who's coming over to borrow a book. Just ask him, before he comes, to ring the bell, and then toss some treats (you've conveniently left some by front the door) before he enters. What you do from there depends, of course, on how serious your dog's problem is. It's not critical that every week has the same schedule. Some weeks are busier than others, so every week won't look the same. Don't worry about it, just do what you can, whenever you can.

Good news and bad news: The bad news is that you're never really done with this. If you have a dog who is genetically predisposed to be fearful and/or



"protective," you will want to keep this up all his life. The good news is that after you go through an intensive conditioning procedure, it takes far less effort to insure your dog continues his appropriate associations. If I happen to be home when a delivery person comes, I ask them to throw tennis balls for my Border collies. If a family comes to visit, I am sure to take treats down to the barn so that the kids can feed goodies to my guard dog Tulip as they enter the sheep pen. Once your dog responds appropriately, you can use an easy, opportunistic routine like this. If you see any signs of regression, simply back up (immediately don't wait!) and you'll find you can go through the steps quickly and easily the second time around.

Insure your dog overlearns the associations: It's very seductive to see signs of improvement in your dog and then stop the program. I can relate to this easily - I'm full of energy for a new plan for two to three weeks, and then somehow I find it hard to keep up the routine. I'm apparently not alone: it is said to take 21 to 28 days to establish a new habit, and most of us give up at about 14 to 20 days. Problematically, you often see the most extreme improvement in your dog's behavior in the first few weeks, so it's especially tempting to stop there. But be warned: it is dangerous to do just enough conditioning so that your dog isn't obviously scared any more in some contexts. If your dog looks less tense externally, but is still afraid internally, you might end up with an incident that wouldn't have happened when you were "on guard." You must keep this program up long after you think your dog is "fine." It's just like studying for an exam. You need to "overlearn" the information, because in times of stress it's too easy to forget that chemistry formula that you thought you knew. And just like us, it's easy for our dogs to default back to an old habit that hasn't fully been replaced yet when they are under pressure. Smart owners reinforce themselves for each conditioning session, thereby insuring that THEY keep up the desired behavior, too! It's easy to smile at this piece of advice, and then ignore it! Don't make that mistake-it takes stamina to re-condition a dog, and we humans are just as seduced by old habits as dogs are. Stop and think right now of things you might do to reward yourself for keeping up with the program. It might make the difference between completely curing your dog or quitting too early and being sorry later on.

Did you say that I could use this program for something other than a fear of strangers? You can see now how you could use this method for anything that a

dog (or any other animal) is afraid of, whether it's the vacuum cleaner, going to the vet, having her nails trimmed or meeting other dogs. Just go through the steps as described, balancing the intensity of the trigger (the "bad") vs. the treat (the "good"). This method won't work, however, in situations where your dog's behavior isn't at least partially motivated by fear. There are many reasons why dogs can "misbehave," so if your dog has ever been threatening to people you must insure that fear is part of their motivation before starting this process.

## WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU AND YOUR DOG GET SURPRISED

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All the advice above concerns situations where you have control - control over the distance people are from your dog, control over when you open the door to your house, etc. But no matter what you do, sometimes things aren't going to go as planned, and it's important that you are prepared for those times. After all, if you don't know how to respond when you and your dog are surprised, how could your dog?

Be conservative. I'm not talking politics here. This is just another reminder to play it safe and prevent that old habit from coming back. If your dog just growled at a visitor, taking him to the farmer's market on a busy weekend is probably, uh...not a good idea. If you think you can't handle what might happen with a cool, calm demeanor, much less prevent your dog from scaring someone (and probably himself too), then play it safe. Put Duke in the back room, take Fido to a kennel for the weekend, or leave Jenny in the car. Remember that dogs are always learning something - so each walk, each visitor, each occurrence of any kind is either going to help them improve, or set them back. You get to decide, at least most of the time.

And what do I do when my dog and I get blind-sided? All the advice above is based on you being able to control the environment around you and your dog. But this is life we're talking about here. Real life. Life where, no matter how careful you are, "stuff" happens. So what do you do if someone surprises both you and King by bolting around a corner? King's eyes get like pancakes and he's barking and lunging like the dog from hell and all you can think to do is to hold on. Well, that's a good start, keep it up. Additionally, consider what you're

holding on with - be sure the equipment you are using really gives you control over your dog. My favorite collar/leash combo is to use a good nylon leash with a head collar or harness with the leash at the chest. If introduced and used correctly, they give you a tremendous amount of control over even a big dog. Regular snap collars and "choke" training collars seem to have little effect on an out-of-control dog, so take the time to find what works for you, before you get surprised at that corner.

Immediately decrease the intensity of the trigger. If your dog is barking and lunging and you are both shocked and surprised, you are not in a position to do some fancy obedience work. Your first job is to decrease the power of the trigger stimulus as quickly as possible. That usually means increasing the distance between you and the surprising stranger. So don't tell your dog "NO" while standing still, and don't try to make him sit if he's truly panicked. Rather say "NO" or "UGH" in a calm, quiet voice and simply turn and walk away. If you can't say something in a quiet authoritative voice, (perhaps your own voice might sound a little anxious itself?), then speaking now will only serve to increase or confirm your dog's fears ("Oh no, she's scared too! This person must be REALLY dangerous!"). In this case, either sing Happy Birthday, or simply stay silent and walk away.

But here's the rub. If you simply walk away and do nothing else, what has your dog learned? ("Walking down the street, walking down the street, life is good, OH NO OH NO OH HELP DANGER DANGER BARK BARK LUNGE BARK OH Oh No, oh, they're going away, oh I feel better now, oh, thank heavens they're gone I feel so much better.. .1 bark and then they go, oh I'm so glad they're gone..."). Your dog got rewarded for barking and lunging, so it's easy to predict that she is going to bark and lunge again next time, isn't it? If at all possible, get just far enough away to be able to communicate with your dog, and then ask for a sit. Sitting is a controlled, measured posture that can help calm your dog. It asks her to control her reactions to her own emotions, but is not too intimidating for her when she's nervous. (Lie Down is simply too much to ask of a dog in this context - would you feel better if asked to Lie Down in an alley right beside the guys you thought were going to mug you?)

If (and only if the dog is calmer, then SLOWLY, with circular motions, pet his chest. Avoid those primate-like pats on the top of your dog's head-they don't appear to calm dogs, they either irritate them or hype them up, and that's the last

thing you need. Speak quietly, with long extended notes: "Gooooooood boy, wwwwwwwhat a goooooooood boy you are." And he IS a good boy now, right? He's not barking and lunging, and if you're lucky, the stranger is still around, just a little farther away. Treats are fine now, IF your dog is sitting quietly.

If the person disappears as fast as they appeared, then try to set this exact situation up again (in the same place, if possible) with a friend until you can get it to end the way you'd like (safety first!). You want the dog to learn that the barking and lunging had no effect whatsoever, and that the person left after he was quiet and calm. That way he'll learn that the person wasn't a danger in the first place, and the way to feel better and get strangers to go away is to sit down quietly.

So in summary, if your dog is suddenly over his head, immediately increase the distance between him and the stranger, stop as soon as you can, and get King in a sit. Praise, pet and treat him IF he's good. I've never seen any research on this, but I believe that it's important to then replay these situations (this time where you can control the stimulus better) to insure the right associations are left in your dog's mind.

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Help! I don't have the time to do this! I can imagine that right around now a person might be saying: "Good grief? It sounds like I'll have to work at least 5 times a week for months and months to successfully turn my dog around! I love my dog, but I simply don't have that much time." Boy is that a reasonable reaction. If the dog has a serious problem, it will indeed take a lot of time and energy. Just because you love your dog doesn't mean you are in a situation to successfully treat him or her. Some dog-loving, responsible people find that they simply can not find the time or emotional energy to keep treating a dog with a serious behavior problem. Keep remembering that you always have a choice - perhaps you do indeed have the time to treat this dog, perhaps it is possible to safely place the dog in another home, or perhaps there is no other alternative but euthanasia. Only you can make the choice, but don't forget that you are not alone. Talk in-depth to experts who treat serious behavioral problems, and utilize their experience to help you make the best decision for you and your dog.

Please remember that sometimes the kindest and most loving action is to place your dog in another home where others will have more time for him. I placed one of my adult dogs in another home once, and I know the insecurities that can plague us late at night. "Am I doing the right thing? How do I find the right home?" "Am I betraying my best friend?" Only you know what's best, but remember that although dogs love their humans like family, they can change families relatively easily. It might hurt your feelings, but your dog can love other people just as much as she can love you! Be objective: your responsibility is to provide the best possible environment for your dog. It may not be your own home. If you are considering placement (or euthanasia), I strongly encourage you to talk to professionals who specialize in behavior problems. They can objectively help you consider reasonable alternatives.

If you do decide that you and your family have the time and the motivation to work on this, don't be intimidated by the lengthy description of the process. It really is easier to do than to describe, once you get the idea. Just be absolutely sure that you understand the fundamentals of the program, and once you get started you might be surprised how easily it becomes part of your day.

How do I know how much to do, and for how long? When you begin treatment you simply can't know exactly how long a successful program will take. In general, the amount of time it takes depends on how serious the problem is. It can take a couple minutes a day for a few weeks for a really mild case, and it can take substantially more time for a severe one. The good news is that you don't need an hour a day, every day. But you do need to be able to set up constructive situations for your dog several times a week, at a minimum. If you are ever unclear about whether it's appropriate to move on to another step or not, or whether you're doing it often enough, contact someone experienced with these methods for advice. You wouldn't just start tinkering under your car's hood in hopes that random actions would fix that pesky engine noise, so don't make wild guesses about how to condition your dog!

Is there a guarantee that all this work will completely cure my dog? Nope, not at all. It's tough on all of us, but there is no way to accurately predict which dog will be helped or which will not. There are simply too many variables that drive a dog's behavior to be able to predict which dog will respond to treatment. Obviously the more moderate the problem, the higher the likelihood of success.

Starting as early as possible, before the behavior becomes an ingrained habit, will radically increase your chance of success, as will learning as much as you possibly can about how to train and handle dogs. Dog training is not something that nice people just automatically know how to do right. It is a science, a sport and an art. Take it seriously-if you're reading this booklet, you have an advanced model dog and you need advanced level skills to handle him!

A constructive approach for many dog owners is to set a time limit within which to work, say three, six or 12 months, and then evaluate the dog's progress along the way. Ask yourself if the dog is truly improving, and ask yourself if you are willing to keep up with the treatment. As importantly, remember that you are never really "done," it just gets easier and easier. Prevention is easy, but so is back-sliding. Always be ready to remind your dog how much fun those strangers really are, and bask in his enthusiastic greeting when the pizza delivery boy comes!

#### HERE'S A SUMMARY OF THE TREATMENT STEPS

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1. **MAKE IT SAFE:** Do all that you can to insure that your dog will not be surprised and scared by whatever has scared him in the past, and do all that you can to insure that your dog can't possibly hurt anyone.
2. **DETERMINE YOUR DOG'S TRIGGERS (THE "BAD"):** Have a clear picture of the stimuli that trigger your dog's fearful reactions. Be as specific as you can.
3. **FIND FIDO'S PASSIONS (THE "GOOD"):** Decide what special food or toy makes your dog crazy with desire, and withhold it except during treatment sessions.
4. **LINK UP HIGH INTENSITY "GOOD" AND LOW INTENSITY "BAD:"** Set up situations where your dog gets whatever she loves right after noticing a low intensity version of one of her triggers.
5. **GRADUALLY INCREASE THE INTENSITY OF THE TRIGGER:** Step by step increase the intensity of the trigger stimulus.

And the last step is the easiest of them all: DON'T SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF! Unless your dog has a serious problem, don't feel as though you must do every single thing right every single time! There is a lot of wobble in this system for dogs with mild to moderate problems-you really don't need to do everything perfectly every single time to get it to work. This booklet is written as carefully and precisely as possible, but that doesn't mean that everyone reading this booklet needs to be follow every direction to the letter at every moment. Certainly, if your dog has a serious behavioral problem that might result in an injury you should be working with a professional. But if they don't, then all you have to do is to learn the basics, follow the program to the best of your ability and don't sweat the small stuff!

## WHAT ELSE CAN I DO TO HELP MY DOG?

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The "Leader of the Pack" Program: Every dog feels more secure if he knows the rules, and if he knows that he can count on you to be in charge. I suspect that many fearful dogs become aggressive out of a belief that they must be responsible for the pack's safety, when they'd really rather you took charge and let them off the hook. Some dogs are naturally more predisposed to want to be in charge than others, but all fearful dogs will profit from understanding that you are in charge, so they don't have to be. You don't get leadership over your dog by being aggressive; you get it by not catering to your dog's every whim! If your dog comes up and "begs" to be petted, translate that action into "YO! Human, pet me now!" You wouldn't let your child harass you for an icecream cone while you were on the phone, so don't let your dog demand that you get him whatever he wants whenever he wants it. Look for the booklet How to be LEADER OF THE PACK and have Your Dog Love You For It! for more ideas about how to be a benevolent leader.

Obedience Training: Fun, friendly obedience training that uses lots of positive reinforcement is an essential part of providing boundaries and leadership for your dog. It's also like having a large tool box that you can carry around with you wherever you go - if your dog is doing something he shouldn't, obedience training allows you to simply ask him to do something more appropriate. Imagine, for example that Clancy is leaping and barking at a squirrel. You could say "NO!" but what information would you be conveying to Clancy? Don't look

at the squirrel? Don't look over there toward the west? Don't leap up? Don't bark? You can see that "no" gives your dog very little information about what you'd like him to do. But if your dog is trained and knows a variety of signals, you could say "Clancy, sit and watch," which Clancy will understand to mean: Sit down quietly and look up at my face and don't look away until I say "OK." What a lovely alternative to simply yelling "No!"

If you don't know the new positive methods of dog training then go out of your way to learn them. Enroll in classes (if appropriate) and/or read as much as you can. Nothing substitutes for one-on-one coaching (how much could you learn about ice skating from just reading a book?), but good books can go a long way toward getting you started on the right track. I have a small book called *Beginning Family Dog Training* available through my office (at 608/767-2435) that you might find useful. Also look for any of the training books by Dr. Ian Dunbar, *Parenting Your Dog* by Trish King, and *The Power of Positive Dog Training* by Pat Miller. Avoid books that advise using leash corrections and punishments as the primary way of communicating with your dog. Punishment-oriented training should be as extinct as the dinosaurs.

**Operant Conditioning & Other Training Perspectives:** Another type of conditioning is called Operant Conditioning, where the animal learns to "operate" on its environment to get something that he or she likes. I have often used this method to help fearful dogs once they were over the worst of their fears. My little dog, Mist, was terrified of unfamiliar dogs. She was also one of those "get them before they get me" dogs, so I really had a serious problem that had to be treated in my own backyard. Operant conditioning was part of her treatment program. I taught Mist to look toward the new dog when I said "Where's the dog," and then gave her a treat each time she looked. After three sessions she'd associate the new dog with good things, and thus became polite. Learn more about Operant Conditioning by picking up *Don't Shoot the Dog* by Karen Pryor and/or *Ex-celerated Learning* by Dr. Pamela Reid.

There is always more than one road to any city, so don't hesitate to be creative in your quest to calm your animal's fears. For example, last week my 100 pound Great Pyrenees decided she was terrified of the front door, after having come inside it for three years now. Who knows why! I tried the counter conditioning techniques described in this booklet for three sessions, giving her hot dogs as she got closer and closer to the front door. She got better the second session, and



then regressed during the third after a few minutes. So the next time, I simply walked her on leash inside the other door, went out the offending door and just turned back around and went in before she knew what was happening. Why she wasn't afraid to go out, but was afraid to go in that particular door is a mystery to me, but by approaching the problem from a different perspective I saved a lot of time and got it solved in one session.

**Exercise:** Under-exercised dogs are more reactive than ones who get enough exercise, so you can raise your dog's threshold of response (or lower the intensity of the trigger) just by getting your dog more exercise. Keep in mind that walking a Retriever or a Standard Poodle around the neighborhood on a leash does not qualify as exercise, except maybe for you. Dogs need to trot or run, even if they are just playing ball in the house. Begin an exercise program for your dog in which they get to trot fast or run at least two times a day for at least 15 or 20 minutes. They also need mental exercise, and that gets us back to obedience training! Anxious dogs profit tremendously from having something constructive to think about rather than their fears, so teach your dog something else to do. Teach her standard family dog training commands like sit and stay. Teach her tricks to get both you and your dog giggling together. Teach him to track a scent or jump over agility obstacles. Teach him anything but bad habits, and keep his mind and body busy!

**Diet:** Be sure your dog is getting a healthy diet- either through high quality kibble or food you prepare yourself. Some dogs do better on some food rather than others, so be open to evaluating your dog's diet during treatment.

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If you've read all this, you have a lucky dog indeed! May he be as good a friend to you as you are to him. The best of luck to both of you.

Other books and booklets by Patricia B. McConnell, Ph.D.

For the Love of a Dog: Understanding Emotions in You and Your Best Friend

The Other End of the Leash: Why We Do What We Do Around Dogs

Family Friendly Dog Training

The Cautious Canine: How To Help Dogs Conquer Their Fears  
I'll Be Home Soon! How To Prevent and Treat Separation Anxiety  
How to be Leader of the Pack, and have Your Dog Love You For It!

Books with other authors:

Puppy Primer,

by Brenda Scidmore and Patricia B. McConnell

Feeling Outnumbered? How to Manage and Enjoy Your Multi-Dog Household,

by Karen B. London and Patricia B. McConnell

Fiesty Fido: Help for the Leash Aggressive Dog

by Patricia B. McConnell & Karen B. London

Way to Go! How to Housetrain a Dog of Any Age

by Karen B. London & Patricia B. McConnell

For information on these books and on training videos, go to [www.patriciamcconnell.com](http://www.patriciamcconnell.com)

“This book saved my dog’s life and secured his place in my heart and home forever.”

—Karen Vögt



*Patricia B. McConnell, Ph.D. is a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist who has worked for over twenty years evaluating and treating behavioral problems in dogs, including dog-dog aggression. Dr. McConnell is the founder of Dog’s Best Friend, Ltd., the co-host of Wisconsin Public Radio’s nationally syndicated radio show Calling All Pets, the behavior columnist for Bark magazine and a much-sought after seminar speaker. She is the author of many books, including the critically acclaimed book, The Other End of the Leash, and the award winning For the Love of a Dog: Understanding Emotion in You and Your Best Friend.*



So many behavioral problems in dogs result from fear, but fear-based problems can become worse if treated incorrectly. This booklet provides a step-by-step explanation of counter classical conditioning and can help you prevent and treat behavioral problems related to fear—whether your dog’s fears include the vacuum cleaner, people with hats, or the stranger at the door. Covered are the important details related to identifying exactly what triggers set off your dog, creating a step-by-step treatment plan, monitoring your progress, and why you need to treat the fear and not just your dog’s reaction to it. This booklet has helped thousands of dogs and their owners around the country, and can help you and your dog too!



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