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CANINE: CONTROLLING JUMPING UP AND DOOR CHARGING

My dog charges the door whenever someone knocks or rings the bell, what can I do?

Door charging and uncontrollable excitement when visitors arrive is extremely disconcerting and potentially dangerous. Without proper control of your dog he could charge out the door and into the street where he might get injured. If this behavior is also accompanied by aggressive responses such as aggressive barking, growling, snarling, lunging, snapping or biting you should seek the guidance of a veterinary behaviorist since this presents risks to those who enter your home. With or without aggressive responses, until you can change the dog's behavior he must be securely confined before you answer the door. This could be in another room, behind an inescapable barricade or closed door, in a crate or by an adult holding the dog on a leash (preferably with a head halter for additional control).

To deal with door charging without aggression start by teaching the dog to 'sit' and 'stay' for a food reward in the entry area. If the dog cannot sit and settle at the door without distractions, you should not expect to be able to control the dog when the door is opened or when visitors arrive? Training is likely to be most successful and most effective if you utilize a head collar and leash. It may help to use a mat or rug to designate the proper place for the dog to relax and settle for training. As the dog learns to a relaxed sit or down-stay or settle on a mat (see our handout on settle exercises) you should be able to walk to the door, touch the doorknob or even open the door without the dog moving. If the reward is sufficiently motivating the dog should soon look forward to staying in place each time you practice approaching and opening the door. Gradually phase out food treats when the behavior is learned and can be reliably repeated. If barking is a big part of the problem you also should work on controlling barking by using our handout on barking in dogs.

Each time you leave the house, also be certain to practice training calm doorway behaviors. If you are taking your dog for a walk, teach him to sit and settle before leaving the house and have him follow you on a controlled walk as you leave. If your dog is staying home when you leave and he begins to get excited or anxious, teach him to lie quietly on his bed or mat, and reward this with a stuffed food toy or special chew, before walking out the door.

Next you may need to practice getting the desired response with people entering the home.

Begin with family members. First have them enter while the door is open so they can be seen. Next have them ring the bell while the door is open and then enter. Finally try with the door closed. Each time, get the dog to sit and stay or a settled down. Also practice proper greeting behaviors by having your dog sit quietly (or even give a paw) before the special treat or petting is given. Again a head halter can help to ensure that the desired behavior is achieved before rewards are given. By closing the door, then re-entering and greeting multiple times in the same session, your dog's excitement level should gradually decrease, making it progressively easier to accomplish a proper greeting. Another option is to have the dog stay on its mat as you open the door and enter, and then bring the dog in a controlled walk out where it should be taught to greet by sitting quietly for a treat and petting. Once your dog has mastered arrivals and greetings with family members, proceed to other friends and family members with whom your dog is familiar. Use a leash and head halter to ensure the right behavioral response (sit / down / mat) is achieved, and give favored food rewards to ensure a positive outcome. Always require your dog to 'sit' before it gets petted and you can go along way to eliminating jumping behavior.



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How can I prevent my dog from jumping up on others and me?

For many dogs, jumping up on people is part of their greeting routine. Often, owners have tried to discourage this behavior using methods such as squeezing the front feet, stepping on the dog's toes, or kneeling the dog in the chest. Yet the behavior continues. For some dogs these techniques provide an uncomfortable but acceptable form of attention. For others, the technique leads to increasing anxiety as people arrive at the door, and conflict behaviors such as circling or urine leaking can develop since the pet is motivated to greet as well as avoid. Therefore in both cases the problem is gradually being further aggravated. If that is the case with your dog, then it is important to think about what might be motivating the dog to jump up and what is the reinforcement for the behavior continuing, and to avoid exposure until you can gain sufficient control with verbal commands, head halter training or both.

Usually the motivation for the jumping up behavior is to greet people. Many dogs like to greet "face to face", like they do with their canine counterparts. Some people, however, find this objectionable. Dogs that jump up can also cause injury or scare the visitor. The visitor's reaction to the dog (whether it be fear or retaliation) would then serve to make the dog anxious about further visitors coming to the home. In addition, strong punitive responses when people enter the home can create anxiety and could make the dog aggressive as he anticipates that people entering the home create an aversive situation for him. Correction therefore must not be directed at punishing the problem, but rather at finding a means of teaching the dog an appropriate greeting behavior. This usually is a sit/stay, which can then be rewarded with food and attention. Once the dog has perfected this at the doorway, when there are no people coming or going, its time to begin practicing with family members, before progressing to familiar visitors and then to greeting new people arriving at the home. Make the dog sit and stay when people arrive and give the dog the special training treat. If the dog gets up, then put him back in the sit and try again until the dog remains sitting through the arrival. Often placing a "treat jar" by the front door with a bell on it will help. Once the dog associates the bell on the jar with a treat, and a treat with a sit/stay, the dog will be more likely to perform the task.

Another way to train this behavior, if you feel that you have sufficient control, is to set up visitors to come to your home. You will likely have the best control of your dog if you use a head collar and a leash for this exercise. Have the first person come to the door. Instruct your dog to 'sit' and 'stay'. Then, let the visitor in. Hopefully, with some effort, you will get your dog to continue to sit. Have the person enter, give a treat and sit down. After five minutes, have them leave by the back door, come to the front and enter again. This second entry should go easier as your dog will have just seen the person. If you can repeat this 4-6 times for each visitor, the dog will have plenty of opportunity to learn the new task.

Once you understand the motivation, and have trained a new task, you need to be sure you have identified all the reinforcement for the behavior. If the dog succeeds in getting any attention for the jumping behavior, then the dog will continue to jump. Attention includes petting, pushing away, (which resembles play behavior), and even mild reprimands, all of which can be reinforcing for a dog that really wants attention. To change this behavior you need to remove ALL reinforcement. This may mean that you do not look, speak, touch or interact with the dog IN ANY WAY when it jumps on you. Walk by the dog, give a command such as 'sit', but do not interact with the dog. Alternately, you could try a disruptive stimulus to see if you can disrupt the behavior just as it begins.

To use disruption for jumping up, you need to be able to QUICKLY AND HUMANELY interrupt the behavior. This is often best done with some type of device that makes a loud noise. Shaker cans, ultrasonic trainers, rape alarms, and air horns, all make loud noises that will often startle the dog. As soon as the dog hesitates, you need to give the dog an alternative command so that the dog can do the proper thing, and then reward the dog with praise. So, as you administer the noise, you say "SIT" and when the dog sits you reward it with praise and food treats if available. Many dogs soon learn that, to avoid the noise, they need to sit and will do so to greet you. Then have the person leave, and re-enter the home. Use the device and command if the dog does not immediately sit, and a "good sit" and reward as soon as the dog does sit. Continue to have the person leave and re-enter until the dog sits for its reward without hesitating. Another efficient but costly means of immediate interruption is to use a citronella spray collar. Bark activated collars are useful if the dog also barks as people arrive at the door. Alternately a remote collar can be used to interrupt the jumping and reinforce the desirable response (e.g. sitting).

Another method that is consistently successful at deterring and preventing the jumping up is to leave a leash and head halter on the dog during greeting. All it takes is stepping on the leash or a quick sharp pull to prevent or disrupt the jumping up. Again, be certain to reward non-jumping behavior.

Some people like to allow the dog to jump up on them at certain times. You must never allow the dog to choose the time or the dog will continue to do this behavior whenever it is in the mood, and could learn to greet all people in the same uncontrolled manner. Therefore, if you enjoy this type of greeting first teach your dog to settle and relax for greetings and then teach your dog a command "give me a hug" or "come up here". This way, you have the behavior under verbal control and you decide when the dog will be allowed to jump up.