



FEATURE

# Calmness or Self Control

Words & Images: Le Hammer



*Image: Some dogs can concentrate, other are easily distracted.*

## ***Calmness: to quote the dictionary means free from agitation or strong emotion.***

The very calm pup (or dog) is relaxed - he might be lying down, or he may be playing in a relaxed manner. In terms of his body's physiology - adrenalin and cortisol hormone levels in his blood are low. When the dog's adrenalin levels are low, he is less likely to react in an excited manner to things going on around him. It is easier to attract his attention (eg by calling his name) because all his senses are working with equal acuity.

Calm dogs generally fit better into a family environment. However, staying calm can be difficult for a youngster and some excitable older dogs. There are all sorts of triggers for excitement - kids playing, dogs barking nearby or strangers to be barked at. Stress and fearful situations trigger the same hormones, so being left at home alone or being taken out to unfamiliar places will exacerbate the issues of the excitable dog. The hormones associated with excitement are released quickly but they are not metabolised quickly taking up to 6 days to be removed from the body. So if your dog frequently becomes over-excited there will be build up of those hormones which in turn produces stress. It is just not a healthy way to live.

But there are a lot of things we can do to help these dogs return to calmness. Remove the dog from the exciting environment. Talk to him quietly, stroke him calmly, perhaps gain his attention with food or put him somewhere he knows is safe quiet and familiar. Dogs like a den, a crate, a comfy bed. Soothing music might help (Mozart, not AC/DC). Giving them something to chew on also helps reduce those excitement levels.

You can also train a dog not to react as excitedly to his surroundings. Start in a controlled area then introduce something that normally excites your dog, but at a lower intensity. For example, if your dog becomes overexcited around other dogs, take him for a walk in a familiar area but keep him where he can only see dogs in the distance. It may take several months, but you gradually take him closer to the cause of excitement. Because he is more used to the stimulus of the other dogs, he does not find it as exciting, he releases less of the excitement hormones.

There are many such examples - dogs that are excited with kids playing, with passers-by and joggers, chasing bicycles, barking at birds, fence chasing... the list goes on. In all of these examples help the dog cope by giving lots of treats with a controlled exposure and only gradually increase the degree of difficulty for the dog to stay calm.



*Image: Chewing a turkey neck can help calm a dog down.*

## Is there a difference? Which is better? How do we train them?

Calming can also be taught to puppies by the breeder, before they go to their new families. When their eyes are still closed there are very mild physical stressors you can use such as holding them (securely) in unusual postures or putting them on a cold floor for 15 seconds. Then place them back with their litter. The mild stress causes the release of small amounts of stress hormones and the pup's nervous system "practices" how to deal with them, their biochemical pathways "learn" how to more efficiently metabolise those hormones.

As pups are just starting to interact with litter mates they can get a bit over the top. Just hold an over excited pup firmly, stroke him, talk quietly to him until he calms down.



*Image: Hooning: great exercise for some, but over-exciting for others.*

When pups are with their new family they should learn to sleep happily in a crate or small pen. Let them learn that this is a safe place for quiet time, to relax and unwind. Giving them something to chew on will help them wind down. Chewing and eating are associated with reduced adrenalin.

We do, however, want our pups to have some fun and excitement in their life, like a hoon with their friends or chasing a ball. So we have to teach our dogs to be able to stay tuned in to us, even when fun things are happening around them.

### ***Self Control: the ability to regulate one's impulses when in an excited state.***

A pup, or dog, with self control is able to concentrate on a "task" (usually something the trainer has asked the dog to do) with lots of distractions around. A naturally calmer dog does not need as much self control - impulse control is easier to train. A high drive, very excitable dog needs more training to help him control his impulses, his desire to play his own games.

For dog sports competitors, especially sports like agility, retrieving or flyball, many handlers prefer their dogs to be high drive, or running at high adrenalin levels. These dogs need a lot of training in self control to help them concentrate on what their trainer wants, even with their high levels of adrenalin.

Sometimes families find they have accepted one of these high drive dogs into their family, and because they love their dog they find themselves getting very frustrated. More exercise works for a while, but the young dog just becomes fitter and more boisterous. Do not despair. Appropriate training, appropriate exercise, along with giving the dog some sort of "employment" and ways to calm down will give you a great companion.

As we said before, calmer lower drive dogs are not calm all the time. Playing with friends down at the park can escalate to over excitement, or if some wild life suddenly runs under his nose a chase might follow, or your dog might be seen taking off into the distance following an irresistible scent. You want to be able to intervene by attracting his attention.

Therefore it is a good idea to teach all dogs to have self control, sometimes referred to as impulse control. This training starts by teaching the dog a skill in a low distraction environment. You may need to join a training club or see a dog trainer to learn the best way to teach these skills using positive reinforcement. This article would be 10 pages long if we explained all of that.



*Image: A sniffing expedition helps reduce hormone levels - great for a high drive dog.*



## FEATURE

### Self Control

A basic example is teaching the dog to stay on a mat. Initially there are no distractions. Once the dog can reliably stay on their mat then take your mat and your dog out to train in different locations. Set up situations where there are mild distractions like passers by at a distance, a friend bouncing a ball nearby, a controlled dog (eg on lead) walking nearby. Continue with the training, gradually increasing the excitement in the environment. If you ramp up the excitement too quickly, your dog may learn to tune out and just focus on the exciting environment. Your rewards have to be high grade - fantastic food, a game, something that is going to be more fun than the potential distractions you will be competing with in the future.



*Image: Impulse Control - If your dog controls himself then good thing happen.*

Train several skills and build up games with your dogs, but each new skill should first be learnt with no distractions then add in the distractions. With impulse control your dog should have the skill to check in with you if the unexpected happens and you suddenly have an overexcited companion. You can call your dog back when kids run past, when a kangaroo appears from nowhere or if they see a duck in a nearby pond.

### The Best Environment for a calming a dog

Creating a calmer environment will also help all dogs act calmly and reduce their stress levels. Remember, the reduction of excitement hormones from a dog's blood may take up to 6 days, it takes quite a while for the dog to truly calm down.

Moderate exercise will help reduce "excitement" hormones in their system. Give them a job which usually means give them some training. This will help tire their brains so the dog will find it easier to relax. A play-date with friends (so long as they do not wind each other up too much); enriching their environment with toys and puzzles, even something as simple as scattering their food or hiding food in boxes will help dogs reduce their adrenalin and cortisol levels and I have already mentioned a safe quiet area to relax such as a crate or a pen. Chewing on things, and a chance to investigate different smells is like "doggy yoga" and of course, cuddling on the lounge with you is great for calming down both the dogs and the humans.

*Image (right): Total relaxation*

