

Training Thresholds: A Strategy For Balancing The Emotions Of Anxious Or Over Excited Dogs

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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In [podcast episode number 258](#), I described “The Threshold Game.” And it's a game that I put together for one of my students who had an over exuberant puppy who would lose it when he walked into the training building.

It's a way that got that puppy to redirect his focus onto his owner rather than his environment. And it's a game that helped create calm as he entered the building. And it occurred to me that we really need a deep dive on all kinds of thresholds.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. Now, what is a threshold? We think of a threshold as maybe, like a doorstep that we step over. And we'll often refer to [emotional states](#), the thresholds that they represent, that we don't want to go over this threshold or stay under threshold.

And by definition, a threshold is a level or point you start experiencing something. Kind of vague, isn't it? It's like you're moving, or the dog is moving from one set of antecedents into a different set of antecedents. They may not be new. It's highly unlikely in most cases that it is new. It's just different [antecedent arrangements](#).

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And because it's highly unlikely it's new, the dog has experienced crossing that threshold, going from one experience into the current one. And because of that they could have and likely have developed a [conditioned emotional response](#) to it.

So, it could be that it is a very positive thing, they really look forward to it, like that puppy coming into our training building, and they get excited. And excitement and joy, is something we all love to see in our dogs, but we want to keep it under threshold. We want to have that excitement and joy be contained.

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So, we can have a dog that's joyful, showing a positive CER. We could have them crossing a threshold and we'll get a neutral response. Like when your dog goes from the bedroom to the living room, they don't go in going, “Oh, I'm in the living room!” right? It's the same thing that they experienced the day before. There's really no need. That's a neutral threshold.

Now they might cross a threshold that they might get an unpleasant threshold, one that might create fear or anxiety or overwhelm. Potentially a puppy [going into a veterinarian office](#) or a dog who has had experiences that they didn't like at a veterinarian office, which is why it's super important that we make those experiences intentional for our dog.

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And that's why you needed this episode. So, thresholds can be real or imaginary. It could be leaving a crate or confinement like an ex-pen or the release off a leash or the release from the backyard. So, that is leaving an experience that leads the dog to be allowed to explore or run or do things they like, which could cause them to get excited or overexcited.



Training Thresholds: A Strategy For Balancing The Emotions Of Anxious Or Over Excited Dogs

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A threshold could be the threshold of your home or your car, like leaving your home to go outside. Depending on what that dog experiences, it could be super exciting. It could be leaving the outside to go in your car, or maybe leaving the car to go somewhere new.

It could be like my student crossing the threshold of going into a training class, a veterinarian office, to swimming class, or just to a park that the dog likes to go to. The entry into that park is a threshold that creates, evokes, an emotional state in the dog.

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As does going into a competition ring for many dogs. What is the state, or what does going into the competition ring trigger for your competition dog? Is it excitement? Is it neutral? Or is it one of anxiety or fear or overwhelm?

If it's anxiety, fear, or overwhelm, my suggestion is you might be putting your dog in the competition ring too soon. And honestly, if it's neutral, I would say you're likely putting your dog in the competition ring too soon. Dogs should enjoy going into the competition ring.

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Now, how much if they enjoy it like, love it too hard, then there's a very good chance you're not going to get the best performance from your dog because they won't be in their thoughtful brain. They won't be in their zone of genius. And so, we need to control that trigger and make it be an intentional trigger that we get the response we want from the dog.

An intentional trigger might cause the dog to immediately, "I'm here. Oh, let me check in with you." Or it could be "I'm here. Let me fall back into [Reinforcement Zone](#) at your side." Or "I'm in this new environment, let me offer a [hand touch](#)." Or any other intentional behavior that you have created with your dog that they have a lot of joy.

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Because if we can get them to focus on things that we have our history of being exciting and fun, but not too exciting or fun, then we're going to have a dog that enters those places, those thresholds in a calmer, more thoughtful state, as I mentioned in podcast episode number 258. But why is it that we get the extremes?

We get dogs that absolutely lose it at one end or dogs who are like, "It's a hard no, I'm not going in there." "It's a hard no, I'm not leaving here.", when they know they're about to cross a certain threshold. Why does that happen? And I believe the reason it happens is because initially we don't notice the incremental change of TEMP, [T-E-M-P in our dog](#).

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Or if it's one where the puppy or the young dog gets super excited, we might laugh at it and think it's kind of cute. "Oh my gosh! Yeah, he loves you!", "Oh my gosh, look at it. He would want to see that other dog come walking down the street!", "Oh my gosh, he wants to visit the neighbor." We don't notice it or we kind of laugh at it because it's adorable. "Isn't that adorbs?"

But then what happens as that threshold gets to be more predictable for the dog, the expression of that joy escalates. And it gets to a point where you might start getting irritated. "Can you calm down? What has gotten into you? What's wrong with you?" And you've got to ask yourself, what is the expectation you have of your dog right now?



Training Thresholds: A Strategy For Balancing The Emotions Of Anxious Or Over Excited Dogs

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“Well, I remember he used to like, wag his tail, and get excited, but this is crazy. This is just nuts.” So, my point is we need to be present as we cross those thresholds to the body language, the TEMP our dog is expressing, like I spoke about in [podcast episode number 157](#) when I was talking about your dog's body language.

Because when we're irritated by the behavior of our dog, we have to ask ourselves, what right do we have to have an expectation? Have we intentionally given them a behavior? And if we have, and they're not performing that behavior when they cross that threshold, what is that message?

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Is that the dog being defiant? Is that the dog saying, “I am very determined to get what I want.” Or is that the dog saying, “I actually cannot give you the behavior you taught me because I'm in such an emotional state right now.”

And so, what can we do then? Well, in the moment, all we can do is get out of the moment. You can, depending on the threshold and how often it's repeated itself, and when it happens in the thing before the thing for example, your dog might be super, super excited to go to class. And so, they pull you all the way through the door.

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And we can work on the threshold game there, but what you may not have let me know is that he actually has been [screaming in the car](#) as soon as we crossed the little rumble strip to go down your street because he recognizes that rumble strip means we're almost at the training building. So, we've got to go back to the place where your dog was calm or neutral and start that training there.

It might be crossing the rumble strip, going back across the rumble strip, and going somewhere else and just practicing your relaxation protocol. It may be getting to the training school and walking around the parking lot, getting there on days where there is no class, where there are no other dogs or people to be there.

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There's a lot of things that you can do, but the first thing you have to do is to be able to write down exactly what you don't want. 'I don't want my dog dragging me somewhere.' 'I don't want my dog vocalizing.' And even if the dog is just going, “ah ah ah ah,” that's going to lead to screaming. If the dog is vocalizing, chances are there is some level that is an expression of an emotional state.

We want the emotional state to be neutral. How does your dog behave when they're neutral? At the very least, let's just get happy. Let's just not get crazy town. So, what else do we not want? Obviously, we don't want our dog to feel fearful or anxious or overwhelmed. And so, that's confidence that we have to do to boost that side of the equation.

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Now, we have to write down what do we have and when is the first threshold crossed. So, it isn't when you step into the training building, if when you got out of the car, you were like on roller skates being pulled to the building.

And it's not getting out of the car if he's been screaming and fogging up the windows, screaming so loud in the car. And it's not even in the car if he knows it's Tuesday and he's like panting frantically in the house because he knows 'We go to training class at 5 PM on Tuesdays.'



Training Thresholds: A Strategy For Balancing The Emotions Of Anxious Or Over Excited Dogs

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When is the first threshold crossed? That's when you have to start working on creating a different CER. So, we've got to know what is the criteria that you want? What would you like to see? I would strongly encourage, depending on the level of over excitement you have, if it's over excitement, that you work on the relaxation protocol as described in [podcast episode number 191](#).

That will always help all dogs. It will give them a way that they can calm themselves. It will give them a permission to just chill. Next, we've got to know what does your puppy love? And I don't mean, 'oh, they're crazy for', because maybe when they're in that crazy state, we don't want to add more crazy by going, "Oh my God, that's my favorite treat!"

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Let's get them like they're on a scale of one to 10, their number eight favorite treat. So, what are the rewards that we can use to help create a new behavior? A new behavior that is a more thoughtful, and calm one.

And honestly, if you really want to change the state, you're going to have to be patient and put in the time. What does being patient mean? It means you have to decrease or eliminate the exposure to those triggers right now. And so, I'm going to give you an example.

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I started playing seesaw games with my puppy Prophet. He's eight and a half months. I started it when he was seven months. After three sessions, I noticed he was getting super excited by it. And I thought, you know what, he's only seven months. There's no rush on this. I normally don't introduce like a full seesaw until much, much later.

And so, I put it on the shelf for six weeks. Just this week, I decided to bring it out again to see maybe he's more mature. He's a little more grown up. He's going to be a little calmer with this. Oh, was I wrong. He went from zero to crazy town immediately at me touching the seesaw.

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Now, this could be because there are other dogs in my house that get a little excited when we even say the word 'seesaw.' I don't know why. All I can do is describe what I've got and what I don't want. And so, instead of going and playing more seesaw games, this is what I did.

I put him in the [Hot Zone](#) in the building. I got out a bowl of cooked chicken gizzards, super high value for my dogs. And I got his raw food and two small empty bowls. I put a little spoon of raw food in the bowl, and I waited. And Kim went out and started playing seesaw games with her dog Belief.

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What I did is before they got near the seesaw, I gave him a little bowl of food. And as he was eating that, I gave him another one. As he was eating that, Kim did a game with Belief on the seesaw. Now he started vocalizing as he was eating, but I just gave him a new bowl of food. And very quickly, I would say after five repetitions, he calmed down a lot and just was eating the food. "Alright, we're good."

Now, after doing that for, I don't know, maybe two minutes, I was at a point where I waited until Kim cued the game and then I gave the food. No vocalization, just waiting for the anticipation of new food. And then when I got to the point where the seesaw hit and he didn't make any noise and his body didn't get tense and he didn't get these piercing eyes bugging out of his head towards the seesaw, he was just calm and looking at me. I gave him food plus the chicken gizzards.



Training Thresholds: A Strategy For Balancing The Emotions Of Anxious Or Over Excited Dogs

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So, by the end, I had a puppy who I could walk around the seesaw. Honestly, I couldn't even do that the day before. If I walked near the seesaw, he broke ranks, broke out of Reinforcement Zone, and threw himself on the seesaw, pounding it with his front feet. He was just obsessed with it.

And so, I have no intention of training that obstacle. I don't want a dog who's that crazy. It's just not safe. And so, I will take the time and see, how can I get calm with him just laying on a bed? And very soon, maybe I can get calm with him walking around while other dogs are doing it.

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It is a long game. So, your plan has got to involve a lot of counter conditioning to the stimulus that is creating crazy town or creating the fear. And if in either case you need to stay further away, I can't get very close to the seesaw just yet, and that's okay. I'm playing the long game. With the objective of decreasing the conditioned emotional response to the threshold today while I'm increasing a new more desirable behavior aka calm and focused and thoughtful behavior into the future.

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I hope this makes sense. I hope I've given you something to think about. And what I ask you is, especially if you've got a new rescue dog or you've got a new puppy is, just be present. I'm not telling you your dog should be calm as they're going from your kitchen to your living room.

But if you have a point where you see your dog is getting a little bit high, then that is where you need to say, "Where is this leading? Is this something that I'd like to see?" And if you have kids, a lot of the times just the presence of a child, that's a new threshold. Somebody coming into your house, that's a new threshold.

You need to have a plan considering all the things I just outlined and how are we going to create a new, more thoughtful behavior from your dog. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 258: Training Plan For Hyper Excited Dogs: Play The Threshold Game For Calm Focus](#)

[YouTube Playlist: The Emotional State of Dogs with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 245: Make Dog Training Easy! Quick Guide To Antecedent Arrangements](#)

[Podcast Episode 132: All The Things Your Dog Hates And How To Fix Them](#)

[YouTube Video: Vet Visits For Dogs: How To Create A Positive Experience For Everyone](#)

[YouTube Video: Understanding Your Dog's Reinforcement Zone \(RZ\) with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 63: 3 Easy Tricks Every Dog Should Know](#)

[Podcast Episode 4: T.E.M.P. \(Tail, Eyes/Ears, Mouth, Posture\)](#)

[Podcast Episode 157: Dog Body Language: Understanding Canine Communication Signals And Emotions](#)

[Podcast Episode 165: Why Do Dogs Bark In Cars And How To Stop It](#)

[Podcast Episode 191: Get Your Dog To Calm Down With This Common Sense Protocol For Relaxation](#)

[Podcast Episode 266: Hot Zone And Stays – How One Dog Training Nuance Can Fix Anxiety And Duration](#)



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About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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