

What is Prey Drive and How is it Managed?

WHAT IS PREY DRIVE?

Prey drive is not aggression. In order to successfully manage prey drive behaviors, it's important to first understand what drives them – and it's not aggression. A dog who chases cats, squirrels, birds or chickens is not dominant, nor are they aggressive. Similarly, cats who chase strings are not dominant nor aggressive, they are simply responding to a hard-wired instinct that keeps them alive should they need to feed themselves. This impulse is referred to as “prey drive” and it's a survival instinct. It is triggered without thought.

All dogs have a certain degree of prey drive. In many breeds, this drive has been cultivated to a heightened state in order to do their jobs as herders, hunters and vermin locaters. For example, a border collie could not herd sheep without prey drive. The border collie would also be a lousy help to his owner if he took the sheep down and ate them. The difference here is training, managing the pup's behavior around the sheep at a young age and socializing the dog heavily around sheep so he isn't overstimulated when he first encounters one.

CAN THE BEHAVIORS ASSOCIATED WITH PREY DRIVE BE CHANGED?

Success in changing prey drive behavior depends on the degree of drive. It could be a simple socialization and training process or it could require life-long management. Some dogs are so hard-wired that achieving a reliable level of self-control around furry running things requires the management tactic of: never allowing the dog in a situation to practice such behavior.



IT'S EASIER TO SHAPE APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR THAN IT IS TO CHANGE AN ESTABLISHED BEHAVIOR.

It is natural for puppies to play with other pups, cats, kids, etc. in a chase, pounce, wrestle, mouthing matter. However, the pup needs to learn self-control in these situations. That's where early training becomes crucial for shaping appropriate behaviors and obedience.

Older dogs typically have established behaviors around prey drive because the chase itself is extremely reinforcing. Thus, re-training a dog with a long reinforcement history will take dedication and time, but it can be done.

HOW TO SHAPE APPROPRIATE BEHAVIORS AROUND PREY DRIVE TRIGGERS.

The goal of this type of training is to desensitize the novelty of seeing the cat...or anything furry that scurries. We want the pup to think of the cat as just another piece of furniture. Here's how to do it:



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Pick a mellow time of day and put the cat in a carrier or on a lap and the pup on leash at a distance they can feel comfortable and watch movies.

Allow quiet, curious investigation by the pup and praise/food treats for all appropriate behavior. Use phrases like “easy” or “gentle” and show your pup how. Pet the kitty and then pet your dog. Spread kitty scent on your pup and then the doggy scent on the kitty. The goal is simply to help the cat feel safe and the dog feel calm. Calm curiosity is fine, intensity is not. Disengage your dog’s focus if inappropriate behavior occurs, such as hard stares, freezing, lunging, growling, etc. The one and only goal is to teach the animals to relax in each other’s presence.

YOUR CATS ARE SAFE, BUT THE NEIGHBORHOOD CATS MAY NOT BE.

Many dogs will learn to ignore their own cats in the house, but chase them in the yard. Some will totally ignore their “own cats” but still be triggered by a strange cat that hops the back fence. Dogs don’t generalize well - it’s a challenge to move the training from “specific cats” to “all cats anywhere, anytime.” The other problem is - the house is your domain, so the yard may be seen by the dog as his/her turf. Additionally, the reaction of the cat often times drives the dog’s response. While your own cats are calm and make no big deal about the dog, strange cats startle, jump, run and climb - all of which trigger a far more intense chase instinct in the dog.



ALWAYS BE DEFENSIVELY ALERT.

Prey drive triggers can appear almost anywhere for your dog. If you call your dog before they spot the cat, squirrel, etc. it’s highly likely they will come to you. If you call them when they’ve just noticed the squirrel, it’s still pretty likely they’ll come to you. However, the likelihood of a successful response to the command decreases as the level of distraction increases. So it’s highly important for you, as the leader, to always be aware of your surroundings in order to help set your dog up for continuous behavioral success.