



# SETTLE WORK AND BOUNDARY GAMES

REBECCA MOORE BEHAVIOUR

# WHAT IS SETTLE WORK?



Settle work provides a way to teach your dog to relax. For some dogs this is something they will find difficult to do naturally, particularly if they are nervous, anxious or they live in an environment which they find over-stimulating or just simply too busy.

We might not think that our home is too busy or even too scary. The important thing to remember is that it is what your dog thinks that matters here. We might find getting the occasional visitor and the noise of the neighbours fairly easy to cope with. This does not mean your dog does.

## WHAT DOES IT INVOLVE?

- Teach the dog to relax and go to chill on a 'boundary' when we need them to settle or when they are feeling overwhelmed.
- Increasing relaxation and reducing arousal levels has been linked to reduced stress and improved welfare\*

**57%**

**OF OWNERS  
SURVEYED**

in the PDSA PAWS report (2022) reported observing behaviours in their dogs linked to behaviour issues\*

\*Amaya, V., Paterson, M.B.A. and Phillips, C.J.C. (2020) 'Effects of Olfactory and Auditory Enrichment on the Behaviour of Shelter Dogs', *Animals*, 10(4), p. 581. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani10040581>.

\*The PAW Report 2022 (no date). Available at: <https://www.pdsa.org.uk/media/12965/pdsa-paw-report-2022.pdf> (Accessed: 20 July 2023).

# WHY USE A BOUNDARY?

A boundary is a tangible element in the dog's environment which can be used as a safe space for the dog. For this reason, when training, it is best to use a specific mat, rug or bed (or even a towel) to start with. The 'boundary' should only be used when training so that the dog is always rewarded when it uses it.

If left out at all times, it is too easy to miss opportunities to reward.



## CONTEXTUAL CUES

A contextual cue is a feature in the dog's environment which elicits a behaviour. Think of what happens when you bring out your dog's lead.



## THE FUTURE OF YOUR BOUNDARY

As time goes on, your boundary can become a contextual cue: it will cue your dog to relax when it appears



## USES

Boundaries are ideal for visiting cafes, when visitors arrive in the home, when training multiple dogs, and even when cooking



## BENEFITS

Boundary games can help to manage arousal, teach the dog to relax, build confidence and increase impulse control

# TEACHING BOUNDARY GAMES



## STEP ONE

*Reward any interaction with the boundary*

This may be a look towards the boundary, a step towards it, stepping on it, standing on it, basically anything your dog does which involves the bed in some way (not chewing or ripping it up obviously). When you reward place your food directly onto the boundary. For steps one to seven you'll be staying close to the bed so that you can reward, this changes later!



## STEP TWO

*Reward choosing to go to the boundary*

Avoid using a cue just yet. You are just looking to see if your dog wants to go there. We are still building value in the bed. Each time your dog goes back to the bed (boundary) reward by placing food slowly onto the bed. BE GENEROUS!!



## STEP THREE

*Start adding a release cue*

Your boundary game is eventually going to work rather like a reverse stay. Rather than your dog relying on the stay cue, they will want to stay there automatically and will wait for the release cue to say the behaviour is finished. Start releasing your dog off the bed with a cue ('break', 'okay', 'done' and throw the food after you have said the cue. Then wait for your dog to return to the boundary and start rewarding again.

# TEACHING BOUNDARY GAMES



## STEP FOUR

### *Start adding a position*

The ultimate goal for this behaviour is to teach the dog to relax on the boundary. Down is a naturally relaxed position for most dogs. For this step, once your dog has returned to the boundary and after you have rewarded their return. Ask for (or lure them into) a down and continue rewarding, remembering to place the food slowly down onto the bed. Don't forget to release the dog off the bed and reward their return.



## STEP FIVE

### *Repetition*

Repeat until your dog is reliably returning to the bed without a cue and laying down without a cue. You can test this by staying quiet when they first return to the bed and giving them time to figure out what they need to do. If they don't move into a down don't be afraid to ask and repeat the process until they are doing it without your help.



## STEP SIX

### *Adding a cue for going to the boundary*

Now that you know your dog will reliably return to the boundary (bed) after being released or when the mat is brought out, you can start to add a cue. As they start to move towards the bed, say your cue and reward when they go there. Don't forget to keep rewarding while they remain on the bed and using your release cue.

# TEACHING BOUNDARY GAMES



## STEP SEVEN

### *Work on duration*

Increase the amount of time your dog spends on the bed between each release cue. Try to keep this random so that your dog doesn't start to predict that you will release them off the bed after a set period of time. Another way in which you can build duration is to leave longer spaces of time between each treat. If your dog gets up and leaves, you may have left it too long! Try a shorter period of time between each treat next time.



## STEP EIGHT

### *Changing your location*

We want to make sure the dog is returning to the bed and not to you. To do this, release the dog from the bed and while they are getting the treat, take a step away from the bed. Wait for your dog to return to the bed by themselves and then step back and carry on rewarding as you have done before. Gradually increase the distance you move away.



## STEP NINE

### *More about your distance*

Next start to add distance while your dog is settled on the bed. Place a treat on the bed, take a small step away and then go back and place another. Increase the distance you go away from the bed gradually, changing back to a smaller distance if the dog leaves the bed and tries to follow you.

# WHAT ABOUT RELAXATION?



Settle work provides a place for your dog to relax. However, many dogs will need further help with learning to actually rest while on their boundary.

A further part of settle work is to train relaxed behaviours while on the bed.

For this, we might start to reward the dog tilting one hip over to the side rather than laying down like a sphinx. We might reward the lowering of their head towards the floor or even rolling over to lay on their side. To get these behaviours, rather than manipulating the dog, you can 'capture' these behaviours. This means rewarding these behaviours more lavishly than unrelaxed behaviours while remaining quiet and calm. Use a larger quantity of food or higher value to help your dog see the difference.

## TAKING A BREATH

- Karen Overall provides a number of key exercises for relaxing your dog. Just one of these is the deep breath relaxation protocol.
- This exercise and the settle exercise promotes biofeedback.

## BIOFEEDBACK

### WHAT IS IT?

Biofeedback teaches your dog to change their physiological responses (such as breathing and position) which can help them to regulate how they are feeling.

# KAREN OVERALL'S BREATHING PROTOCOL



## STEP ONE

### *Look*

Teaching your dog to give you eye contact provides a signal for relaxation as part of Overall's protocol.

- Take a treat in your hand and move it towards your eye or your nose. As the dog's eyes follow it, mark the moment their eyes meet yours and reward. Practice this both with and without a treat in your hand (always rewarding after the behaviour). Once your dog is performing the behaviour well start to add a cue such as 'look' or 'watch'.



## STEP TWO

### *Breathe*

Start with asking the dog to 'look' at you for a food treat as in step one. Once your dog makes eye contact reward but stop moving the treat a few centimetres from the dog's nose. Say 'breathe' or 'slow' and watch as your dog's nostrils flare as they inhale, then deliver the treat. The dog will appear to hold their breath which will slow down their heart rate and breathing.



# THANK YOU

These exercises are meant to encourage relaxation in your dog. With relaxation comes calm behaviour and improved focus and attention. While progress may be slow with some dogs, it is well worth investing the time in these life skills. If you find you are struggling or you are seeing signs of behaviour issues in your dog, contact your local APDT trainer or behaviourist for further assistance.

