Reactive Dog Camp, May 30-June 1, 2025 at FDSA Ranch

Lab and Lecture Session Descriptions

Labs will be presented three times each day, at 9am, 11am, and 1:45pm, with different groups of working teams. Lectures will be presented once each day, at 3:45pm, in-person and via Zoom.

Friday, May 30

Lab: Active Management Games, Amy Cook, Ph.D.

Is your dog barking and lunging when they see strange dogs or people? Are you having trouble walking through tight spaces or neighborhoods, unsure of what will trigger her, not sure what to do when that happens? Do you feel like you're always reacting after the fact? Take heart! You're not alone!

Many dogs overreact at the sight of other dogs and people in their environments, and that leaves many of us without a plan of what to do. We might be stressed out, embarrassed, and even angry at our dogs, and feeling limited on where we can go. But rest assured, your dog is having a problem, not giving you one, and being proactive is your best plan!

In this lab we'll go over 3 games that will keep your dog's attention on you and off a nearby trigger, and you'll be able to get the space you need to support your dog.

Lab: Circle Method Walking for Reactivity, Karen Deeds, CDBC

Have you ever watched the horse races or been to a stable where there are horses? You will often see handlers on the ground moving the horses in a circular motion, whether it is a tight circle perhaps while the rider is mounted, or in a more relaxed larger circle which is called lunging. The tighter circle tends to be to gain control with an already over-aroused horse, while the more relaxed circle is beneficial for developing connection, communication, and of course to keep the animal moving forward.

Having grown up showing horses, I often found myself using circling (without realizing it) when I was approaching something that the horse was worried about, loading into the trailer, walking over a bridge, passing by a scary object. It allowed the horse to acknowledge the 'thing' and then we release pressure by moving away. It is a great way to let the horse acclimate to something in their environment in a more natural way.

So what does this have to do with dogs? Well, we can apply the same concept to allow our dog to 'rectify' things in their environment by the approach/release fluidity that circling provides. I do find it beneficial to do some counterconditioning to leash pressure and for the handler to be able to use their body and voice cues to help their dog feel safe and to encourage the dog to move away in a circle, regroup, and re-approach.

During this live session, we will work on developing a positive response to leash pressure, leash handling and awareness of your dog's needs and how circling can help your dog adapt to situations that may previously have been scary, frustrating, or over arousing.

Lab: Cooperative Care, Sophie Liu, DVM

Cooperative Care is a well-known practice in exotic animal settings that allows the participant (the patient) to voluntarily engage in husbandry or veterinary care. It is a well developed method of providing care in exotic animal settings because, well, you can't safely wrangle a tiger for vaccinations! However, cooperative care is a newer concept in companion animal settings because we've traditionally had the ability to outmaneuver dogs and cats. In a veterinary setting, we've had the ability to flip dogs onto their sides and contort their limbs and heads to do the simplest veterinary procedures. Unfortunately, this traditional type of handling often causes stress. And, frankly, it's unpleasant for the owners as well!

The great news is that dogs can learn cooperative care skills, and they can be exceptionally good at them, too! Cooperative Care is especially important for reactive dogs because they tend to be highly sensitive to negative events and more likely to anticipate future threats. In this lab, we'll dive into the most important themes of cooperative care and we'll begin teaching some fundamental concepts, such as:

- The concept of offered behaviors
- Start-buttons: long-duration behaviors such as Sit, Down, or Chin Target
- Props: Mat or Platforms
- Handling cues

Lecture: Play Way, Amy Cook, Ph.D.

Play is the natural language of social animals, and that means both you and your dog can do this! But it's not always easy to access, and sometimes you end up in a staring contest or with a dog that's excited and mouthing you too much! Getting into a play relationship that works for both of you means knowing the details of this language, and starting with simpler aspects.

Play, especially play that doesn't involve toys, is also a really useful skill for helping your dog feel better, to gauge threshold for other training, and to establish a sensitive language you can use everywhere you need it. Developing a good social play relationship is worth the time and investment, and besides, it's fun! This lecture prepares participants conceptually for the labs taking place the following day. I'll go over the benefits of play, how to start the interaction, how to stay in the conversation, and ways you can collaborate when needing to start with something familiar to get it going.

Saturday, May 31

Lab: Buddy Walks, Sophie Liu, DVM

Many reactive dogs demonstrate more explosive behaviors when they're walked alone than when they are walked with a known, stable companion. This is both because many reactive dogs come from a place of insecurity and because dogs are now known to have robust social mimicry abilities. In this way, social support is a powerful non-food intervention that fulfills a reactive dog's social needs, provides excellent role modeling, and helps the handler develop a robust community. We have consistently seen reactive dogs improve with the help of "buddy walks", or parallel walks with known, friendly, stable dogs, and we've seen the wonderful confidence it provides reactive dog owners.

In this lab, based on the skill level of the reactive dog, we will begin teaching participants how to incorporate a stuffed dog or a neutral stable dog into "Buddy Walks."

Lab: Movement Puzzles, Karen Deeds, CDBC

Movement puzzles were created by Mari Valgma and are based on the "two bowl" game or the "vito" game from Susan Garrett. It will combine shaping and handler mechanics to help build your dog's confidence emotionally and physically. It will help your dog move with balance, precision and awareness. This helps to build confidence in things in the environment as well as obstacles they are exposed to. It helps to create a "thinking dog," which means it will help dogs that are worried about the environment, people, or things, whether they stress down or are reactive. It creates clear communication which can reduce frustration for both the dog and the handler.

We can use it as another pattern game that can be applied within the desensitization and counterconditioning procedure. Once a pattern is well established, we can then add in distractions and/or triggers.

Lab: Play Way, Amy Cook, Ph.D.

This lab picks up where yesterday's lecture left off, moving from concept to practice. Play is the natural language of social animals, and that means both you and your dog can do this! But it's not always easy to access, and sometimes you end up in a staring contest or with a dog that's excited and mouthing you too much! Getting into a play relationship that works for both of you means knowing the details of this language, and starting with simpler aspects.

Play, especially play that doesn't involve toys, is also a really useful skill for helping your dog feel better, to gauge threshold for other training, and to establish a sensitive language you can use everywhere you need it. Developing a good social play relationship is worth the time and investment, and besides, it's fun! In this lab we'll explore with working teams how to start the interaction, how to stay in the conversation, and ways you can collaborate when needing to start with something familiar to get it going. Come play with us!

Lecture: Predictability and Choice, Karen Deeds, CDBC

Some may feel these are synonymous with Structure and Agency. Semantics? Perhaps! However, structure can help provide predictability just like a routine can, and choice can allow for the feeling of agency. For this lecture we will look at them more like opposites since structure and choice are opposite by definition and we are using structure synonymously with predictability.

For some, structure has become a bad word within the force-free mindset. When we can apply agency/choice to achieve predictability and structure, can't we have the best of both worlds? Why are they important concepts in the dog world, and how do you determine which one is the most appropriate for your dog?

There are different types of dogs that need different things. Giving an anxious dog too much choice can increase anxiety, like a child deciding what they want to eat. Too many options may lead to stress, frustration, or shutdown. For those dogs, adding predictability and reducing choices can provide relief.

Some dogs, when given too much choice, make unsafe decisions and put their own wellbeing, their housemate's wellbeing, or their handler's wellbeing at risk. Again, like the child that has no direction in life and makes poor life choices.

Recognizing whether a dog's actions stem from emotion or instinct is key to understanding what they need. This lecture will help you determine the right balance of predictability and choice for different dogs and teach you how to apply these principles effectively.

Sunday, June 1

Lab: Dopamine Dive – Box Feeding, Karen Deeds, CDBC

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that influences pleasure, motivation, attention, mood and learning. We can use increased dopamine levels in our dogs to help with the counterconditioning process in a variety of environments and situations. Dopamine can influence emotional balance and help to reduce stress and anxiety.

So, how can we easily create more dopamine in the dog's brain? Eating!

The "dopamine box" or box feeding is used to build confidence, desensitize to sounds, develop duration as a concept, and develop working under pressure; it's been used for scent work, tracking, and bite sports.

The box itself can become a visual cue that carries a positive conditioned emotional response. Shaping the process so the dog can eventually use their head in the box as a start button behavior allows the dog more agency in the training process. We can use this concept

for various types of fear and reactivity issues, including environment, dog, people, and handling, not just for sound sensitivities!

Lab: Low-stress Restraint, Sophie Liu, DVM

Figuring out veterinary handling and husbandry can feel like losing battles. Traditional veterinary handling has historically focused on human safety at the expense of the patient's mental state. Meanwhile, cooperative care allows the patient to be a happy and willing participant, but it takes a lot of practice and a very accommodating veterinary team. Fortunately, in between traditional handling techniques and fully cooperative care lies Low-Stress Handling and Restraint!

While there's no formal definition of Low-Stress Handling and restraint, it can often be thought of as minimizing distress by familiarizing the patient with common handling procedures and working towards the least forceful, most effective restraint. In this way, we can do our best to "detoxify" veterinary procedures, which is essential for the long term care of reactive dogs. In this lab, we'll cover some critical themes for successful low-stress handling including:

- Muzzle conditioning
- Common restraints
- Handling cues
- Desensitization and counterconditioning
- Making negative experiences least distressing

Lab: Sudden Environmental Contrast and Noise Sensitivity, Amy Cook, Ph.D.

Do booms and crashes send your dog into a barking fit? Does your dog dive for cover when she hears a microwave beep or the garbage truck pass by? Do you have trouble with summer storms and fireworks holidays? Your dog may be noise sensitive!

Noise sensitivity is a common problem, and many dogs develop fears from perfectly ordinary elements of daily life. It can range from social matters like the sounds of dogs and people outside the home, to household sounds like appliances, TV and game sounds, and people walking across the floor upstairs. It may even be fear of thunder and fireworks, which may come up unexpectedly! No matter what your dog is frightened of, there is a lot we can do to help them feel better.

You may have heard that you should "give cookies after the noise" and have tried that and it "didn't work." In this lab I will teach you how truly structure that intervention so that it is able to help your dog learn that noises are not scary at all, but are great fun, and give you the stepwise practice in each step, one at a time, so your dog has the structured lessons that result in effective learning. We will teach your dog the "noise framework" one step at a time, and you'll be able to take it with you and apply it to neutral noises and any sudden change, building to your dog's feared noise.

Lecture: Behavior-Modifying Drugs and Responsible Use in Dogs, Sophie Liu, DVM

Behavior-modifying medications have been studied and used in dogs for decades! However, there is still a lot of mystery surrounding how they work, why they work, and when they should be used. Much of our knowledge comes from rodent and human studies, which presents an interesting challenge because certain rodent tests can tell us about specific behaviors while people can verbalize how drugs make them feel, but very few of these studies apply directly to dogs! So how do we know that behavior modifying drugs work in dogs and how can we use them responsibly?

In this lecture, we'll take a brain-based approach to describing: how dogs process their environment, how they perceive threats (the most common reason for problem behavior), and how drugs help modify their learning and emotions. We will discuss some of the latest findings that describe mechanisms for how particular types of drugs, like SSRIs, help to alleviate mental disorders.

Studies that we will review include:

- Effects of SSRIs on peripheral inflammatory markers in patients with major depressive disorder: A systematic review and meta-analysis
- Meta-analyses of comparative efficacy of antidepressant medications on peripheral BDNF concentration in patients with depression
- The effect of SSRIs on unconditioned anxiety: a systematic review and meta-analysis of animal studies