

To continue our series on common animal behaviors we would like to describe a behavior that we see in daycare and one that you may see as well with your own dog either in the backyard or while out for a walk.

In the daycare environment Barrier Frustration or Fence Fighting is the term we use to describe when a dog gets very vocal and highly aroused due to there being something on the other side of a barrier that either excites them or causes them great concern that they can't reach.

The motivating factor behind this action can be excitement, fear, or frustration. Let's say a dog is excited about the activity happening on the other side of the fence. The barrier causes frustration and can cause the dog to act out by jumping, scratching, barking, whining, or sometimes even throwing themselves at the barrier. Or, there may be a dog that is fearful about what may be approaching on the other side of a barrier causing them to take an aggressive stance before danger arrives. In the daycare environment, this behavior can escalate quickly in a group setting as one dog's arousal level and actions impact the actions and arousal level of other nearby dogs. To make matters worse, arousal levels increasing in one group often have a spill over to other groups.

Training or behavior modification with a professional may differ depending on the motivation of the agitation, but usually they are treated the same way. Like with most undesirable behaviors we would begin any training approach with (1) refraining from punishment revolving around this barrier frustration; (2) finding ways to manage or change the environment to minimize the chance of the behavior occurring. Management is a key supporting driver of the long term success of addressing any behavior. To put it another way, management is what you can do in the moment, without having to train anything, while at the same time attempting to control the environment such that the dog is less inclined to practice the behavior.

In daycare, we manage the environment by reducing the number of places a dog can see other dogs in a way that would increase frustration. For example, last year we renovated our facility, disposing of the old open sight fencing system where the dogs could see through to other playgroups. We replaced it with a new closed fencing system where there are little to no gaps between the fence pickets, greatly reducing the ability for dogs to see into other playgroups.

However there are some places between doors and around crate fronts that are challenging to completely block, especially when dogs are entering, exiting or moving about the building. Dogs can also hear when other dogs or people pass by outside their playgroup, which can be triggering. We manage these scenarios by paying attention to your dog's body language to predict what your dog is likely to do next. If we predict that behavior will be an outburst at the fence, we will use their name (for attention) and then recall them to us before they react, or just as they begin to react but before they are fully engrossed in expressing their frustration. This might look like the dog starting to wander near the fence as activity outside the fence mounts.

Or the dog barks once or twice in the direction of the fence. Some dogs respond well to a recall at this early stage and will disengage. The dogs' response in these scenarios are the deciding factor of how manageable that behavior can be in the daycare environment. For example, we are constantly evaluating how well a dog disengages not only when recalled before the Barrier Frustration behavior occurs, but also how well they disengage while they are actively practicing that frustration behavior. This is one reason we encourage a strong name recognition and recall that can be strengthened through continued practice and reinforcement at home, especially practicing when there are other desirable or enticing activities going on around your dog.

The next method we use in our daycare is body blocking. We previously discussed this method in the [Policing Behavior article](#), where we use this physical intervention to demonstrate leadership and respect for spatial boundaries. In daycare, we may physically step (not in an aggressive manner) between the dog and the fence, to claim the area by the fence. This is done by using the natural awareness dogs have of personal space. If we step into the physical space between the dog and the barrier, many dogs will move away from the barrier (e.g. a gate). Body blocking does not involve physical contact. As simple as this may sound, some dogs respond well to this and respect the Daycare Attendant's space. While other dogs will ignore and push past the daycare attendant, increasing the risk of injuring the Daycare Attendant or another dog in the process, or even themselves.

The last step in management would be to remove the dog from the situation as best as possible. This would most likely mean a calming break or time out during times that encourage Barrier frustration for a specific dog. This does nothing to ease internal tensions but is necessary for safety reasons since the other methods did not work. If we've determined this is the only method we have to work with, we will do this during times when we know a dog may be motivated to bark and/or lunge at the fence. For example during pick-up times in the afternoon, when they see other dogs exiting or continuously walking by their playgroup and our team is coming to the gates frequently to retrieve dogs. We also see this at drop-off time in the mornings, when new dogs are frequently entering the group and your dog may be fearful, anxious, or even excited about changes in his environment.

Some dogs are motivated to exhibit this undesirable behavior more consistently because they are attempting to engage with dogs in the neighboring playgroups throughout the day. And what can be even more concerning is if a dog enters this state of high arousal due to Barrier Frustration and redirects his frustration on another dog in his playgroup or at the human trying to keep everyone safe. A dog in a state of high arousal can lead to a dog making rash and involuntary decisions they may not otherwise make when in a relaxed state. Something that was once "Super fun!" can turn into something "Super scary" quickly. The risk of resulting aggression can be very concerning and we do our best to avoid it.

Without additional training to address the dog's reaction to this type of stimuli, we can only implement management strategies, which could lead to the behavior intensifying over time. At that point, the best recommendation would be to discontinue daycare in order to not inadvertently practice these behaviors on a daily basis. The more your dog practices a behavior, the stronger that behavior becomes. This is the case even if the behavior is driven by a dog's response to environmental factors versus a choice they are making. If your dog exhibits similar behaviors at home around barriers, you can use strategies similar to what we use in daycare to minimize your dogs' ability to practice this behavior.

As for training, we recommend a few options to help. The first would be to establish good manners. When a daycare attendant is working with your dog in a playgroup, the dog should respond to their name, sit when asked, and come when called. Any recall workshop or privates focused on recall would be useful. Additionally, many impulse control workshops or classes will give you an insight on how to keep your dog from expressing intense emotions in an extreme way, or at least to be able to recover quickly from those intense emotions before making bad decisions. Some of the special behavior classes will build this "stress resiliency." We also offer a Social Manners class which could help with strong recalls and redirecting focus in the presence of distractions. In Social Manners 1, all interactions are done on leash with the goal to be able to control the level of exposure to the triggers.

Our overall approach to training is to help families develop and build long lasting relationships with their dog so their dog is a wonderful member of the family. There are times where a dog's inappropriate behaviors are driven by their response to the unique energy and dynamic of being around a group of dogs. We strive to be transparent at all times and work with you to determine the best investment in training and management practices that best fit your family's lifestyle.