

## Caring for a High Arousal Dog

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“High arousal” is a term to describe a dog that gets over-excited and exhibits behaviors like jumping, mouthing (grabbing your body or clothing with their mouth), humping, raking with their front claws etc. Sometimes it might seem like these behaviors come “out of nowhere”, but if you learn to carefully observe your dog’s body language and strictly manage their environment, it will become much easier for you to anticipate or predict high arousal type behaviors and prevent them from happening. However, simply preventing the behavior from happening is not enough. The second, equally important part is teaching him other behaviors to get what they want, which is often your attention.

### **What should I expect from life with a high arousal dog?**

Frustration. It can be difficult to understand what life with a high arousal dog will be like in your home just from your interactions with the dog in our shelter. They have lived here for several weeks, or even months, and in that time have learned how to politely interact with us. Every single one of our interactions with them has been a structured training session in which the rules are always very clear. There have been few times when the dog has been loose in a room and given the opportunity to do whatever they want, much like they might do in a home. Given all of those factors, and the fact that behavior is contextual (they may have learned to behave politely in this context, but will need to learn it all over again in a new one), it is difficult to paint an accurate picture of what their behavior will be like in your home. They might jump up and knock everything off your kitchen counter. They might chew on your base boards. They might tug on your socks, even when they’re on your feet! They might jump up and grab your arm or your hair. There is a chance they might do something that makes you uncomfortable or even a little scared, which would be understandable. An important thing to consider now is how much time and energy you have to spend on a dog that will be quite challenging.

The days of coming home and lounging on the couch carefree are over – at least temporarily. Life with a high arousal dog might mean that you can’t eat your dinner on the couch anymore, or that you can’t leave your shoes sitting by the front door. It might mean that you can’t go for walks in area where there are other dogs for a while, or that you can’t run and play and roughhouse with your dog the way you envisioned you’d be able to. An important thing to consider is how much you are willing to change your day to day life to accommodate a new dog.

**Schedule!** Just like kids, dogs thrive on a schedule. That doesn’t mean that each day needs to look the same as the last, but there should be no or little “down time” during which your dog is left to their own devices to entertain themselves. Your schedule should alternate between exercise (mental and/or physical) and then *structured* settling. Structured settling means your dog is confined, either by a crate or gate/ex-pen, with something to keep them busy like a frozen Kong, puzzle toy, or a good chew.

### **What can you do to change your dog’s behavior?**

Dogs do what works to get the consequences, or reinforcers, that they want. Behavior that is reinforced will continue to happen. Most often, the reinforcer a dog wants is your attention. A dog learns quickly that humans will respond to jumping and grabbing by pushing the dog off and talking to them, all the while making lots of eye contact. Even though you might be very frustrated and you’re telling the dog “no” or “get down”, the attention you’re giving them is actually reinforcing those behaviors. The dog isn’t doing these often annoying behaviors because they are mad at you or because they are being mean or misbehaving – they are doing them because those behaviors have been reinforced, or they have worked in the past to get the attention that your dog wants.

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**MANAGEMENT:** Step one in living with a high arousal dog is to constantly be managing their environment – all day, every day! That means removing anything from the dog’s environment that might get them in trouble. Think of your dog like a new puppy – you wouldn’t expect a puppy to know that your shoes are not chew toys, right? Well your dog likely missed out on learning all of those important lessons as a puppy, so it’s up to you to teach them. You can give your dog the best chance of being successful by removing anything that isn’t appropriate for them to destroy or pee on. As your dog learns, you can slowly begin to introduce “normal” things back into their world, but only when they have proven that they are learning the right behaviors.

**Keep arousal level low.** When working with a high arousal dog, it is important to keep the arousal level as low as possible all the time. That means avoiding playing tug, wrestling, or chase games that are likely to get your dog worked up and lead to jumpy/grabby behavior. Instead of roughhousing, practice games that teach self-control and promote calm behavior. You can also utilize puzzle feeders and other enrichment toys to engage and help tire out your dog.

**Always be either engaged and training with your dog OR confine them with something fun to do.**

Forget about the idea of getting home from a long day of work and sitting down on the couch for a relaxing evening with your dog – at least for the first couple of months! Living with a high arousal dog means that you are always training or your dog is confined with something to keep busy. When working with your dog, it doesn’t have to be a “traditional” training session – you can be playing with a toy, for instance (calmly, of course!), and working on “drop it” and “sit” before giving the toy back. Or you could be using touch as a reinforcer to teach a sit for your attention rather than jumping on you (we’ll talk more about this later!). As long as you are *actively engaged* with your dog, they will be less likely to get into trouble. When you’re not able to manage your dog, like while you’re eating or taking a shower, they need to be confined! If they’re comfortable in a crate, that’s a wonderful tool to use. If not, you can set up baby gates or ex-pens to confine to a small space. But don’t just put them in there with nothing to do! Make sure that to provide a frozen Kong, a nice long-lasting chew toy, a puzzle toy, or anything to keep them busy. Once you’re ready to interact again, those fun toys go away and you do something different together.

**Be proactive rather than reactive.** As you get to know your dog better, you’ll be able to anticipate when they’re going to start (insert undesirable behavior here). They might go from resting quietly to standing up and sniffing around, or go from chewing a toy to scanning the room looking for someone to make eye contact with just before starting to bark. Move on to the next activity in your schedule *before* they do something you don’t like to prevent practicing those behaviors. Remember that the more an undesirable behavior is practiced, the harder it will be to change. If you’re sitting by waiting for your dog to make a mistake (and believe me - they will, if left to their own devices, make lots of mistakes!), then you will spend your life following around cleaning up after him, or spend all your time telling them to stop or get down or knock it off – that’s not the relationship you want to have with your dog. Instead, be **proactive**. Think about the likely “wrong” behavior your dog might do in a situation (for example, always jumping up on the table when you sit down to eat a meal). Instead of waiting for it to happen and then trying to ask for a different behavior, prevent the unwanted behavior from happening in the first place! If you know you’re going to eat dinner in an hour and want your dog to be able to settle while you do, be sure to do something active (training and/or exercise) so that they’re more likely to be able to settle when you need it. When you’re ready to eat dinner, set them up in the confined area *with something to keep busy*. Try your best to always stay a few steps ahead!

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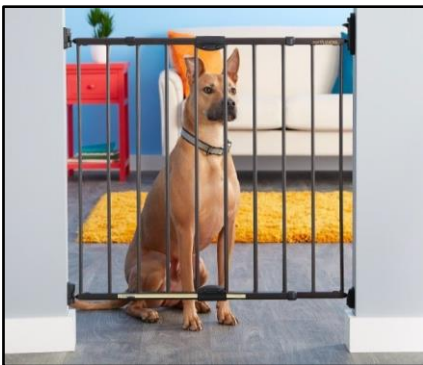
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**CONFINEMENT:** Create a quiet space as your dog's "home base" to use when you or your dog need a break. Don't rely on physical confinement alone, pair it with the necessary behavioral management as well. They should only spend time in their confinement area after having time to get used to the space with you, following plenty of physical and mental stimulation, with an empty bladder, and with plenty of appropriate activities to keep them busy as they wind down for a nap. The space should be:

- **Private:** in a low-traffic area so your dog can easily to relax without seeing or hearing things going on in the home.
- **Puppy-proofed:** your dog is still learning the rules. Remove anything you'd prefer they don't put in their mouth, then gradually allow more access to items as they are successful.
- **Secure:** start with a gate, exercise pen, or closed door.
- **To crate or not to crate:** teaching your dog to love their appropriately-sized crate using positive reinforcement has many benefits, including providing a safe, secure place for them to settle, preventing destructive behavior or accidents when unsupervised, and providing a management tool for times when they need a break or when you need them out of the way.
- **Do not** close your dog in a crate before teaching them to settle inside comfortably. Closing a dog in a crate before they are ready can cause your dog to bark, pace, go to the bathroom, or try to escape, which can cause injury to your dog and make crate training much more difficult going forward. **See our crate training handout** for more information.
- **Play some white noise** (search white noise on youtube, classical music, sound machine, fan) to block out noises as your dog is getting used to the new space.

### Examples:

- Block off an existing room like a spare bedroom, bathroom, or laundry room by using a baby gate in the doorway.
- Use an extra-wide gate to block a wider doorframe to create a confinement space in a living room or den.
- Create a standalone enclosure by configuring an exercise pen into the shape that fits your space. You can create a circle or square by connecting the exercise pen to itself, or use an existing wall to create one or two sides of the enclosure.
- Add visual barriers to reduce arousal and frustration by covering the barrier with a blanket or sheet.



# Caring for a High Arousal Dog

**TRAINING:** In order to teach your dog how to calmly approach you and appropriately ask for and receive attention, we recommend using an approach called Constructional Affection. Constructional Affection is a procedure to teach a dog to politely and calmly ask for your attention, and to remain calm as you pet them. The goal for this exercise is for your dog to quietly and calmly approach you for pets, and remain calm and relaxed as you pet him. Visit [constructionalaffection.com](http://constructionalaffection.com) for examples and resources.



## CONSTRUCTIONAL AFFECTION Interaction Guidelines

This is a visual guide for anyone interacting with "hyperactive," "jumpy," "mouthy," or "scratchy" dogs who really want to interact with us but don't know how to ask for and receive affection and interaction. (Never use this guide with dogs showing signs of fear or aggression)



### How to Provide Affection "Conjugately"

Our affection and interaction are constantly moving and synchronizing with the dog's behaviors. Affection/interaction (reinforcement) is always available, and its magnitude changes fluidly with the dog's behaviors. This helps our dogs learn how their moment-to-moment behaviors directly control the amount of affection and interaction they receive. We pet with long, soft strokes using a soft tone of voice.



### GOAL:

To have your dog calmly approach, and sit or lie down to ask for and receive affection



\*If you want to proceed to the Affection Loop, make sure the dog can sit/lie down for at least 30 seconds while you pet them

**When DOG approaches within arm's reach on their own...**

"We don't lure with treats, chase, or force them to interact with us"

HELLO



All four paws on the ground



IF DOG leaves...

STOP PETTING



PET with ONE HAND



BYE! SEE YOU AGAIN!



### ... with "Undesirable" Behaviors:

**JUMPING**

DOG learns to keep four paws on the ground to ask for and receive our affection

HI



Paws off the ground, open 'bibi' mouth



STOP PETTING and WAIT

Paws off body, returning to the ground...



SLOWLY MOVE HANDS toward DOG



PET with ONE HAND



Continue PETTING



**MOUTHING**

DOG learns to sit calmly to ask for and receive our affection

Head forward, open 'bibi' mouth



STOP PETTING, REMOVE HANDS, and WAIT

Head returning over their shoulders...



SLOWLY MOVE HANDS toward DOG'S MOUTH  
\*like giving water to the dog



PET with TWO HANDS



Continue PETTING



**When DOG sits...**



PET with TWO HANDS

**When DOG lies down...**



PET with TWO HANDS and pour affection on them!

kiss, hug, talk sweetly to them, with lots and lots of loving!

We try to have **no delay** in delivering our affection in relation to our dog's behavior. **It is the dog's behavior that is controlling the magnitude and duration of our affection.** This is key for immediate behavior change and to achieve mutually enjoyable interactions and relationships.



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**Mouthing:** Mouthing behavior is maintained when it is reinforced, either when something good happens immediately following the behavior, or when the behavior is really fun to do. It will be up to you to try to prevent your dog from getting so excited that they start to jump/grab, to avoid reinforcing any attention-seeking mouthing behavior, and to teach them other, more appropriate ways to get what they want (your attention, a toy, etc.). Be aware of what happens immediately following mouthing – if you give a toy every time, they might learn that biting you is how to get access to a toy. Instead, try teaching that using their mouth inappropriately ends the fun activity.

In the beginning, you should always have a toy when interacting so that they are mouthing the toy instead of your hands or arms. (Note: the toy is presented as the activity, not presented as a consequence of putting their mouth on you). If they do put their mouth on you during play, your engagement in play should end immediately but neutrally. Avoid telling them “no” or punishing in any way, simply remove yourself from the situation (get up on the couch and ignore for a few minutes, step out of the room, etc.). You only need to remove yourself for a few minutes for it to be effective, but your dog should “move on” before you come back. So for example, if you step into another room and they follow you while barking at you the whole time, wait for the barking to end and for your dog to move onto doing something else before returning to play again (use physical barriers when possible). When you do return, be ready with a toy for them to put their mouth on instead of your hands again.

Scenarios where you might see your dog use their mouth include when they becomes overly excited, overly tired, or in any other way become overwhelmed. You’ll notice the trend here being a lot of arousal leading to your dog using their mouth – it is a very common behavior from an adolescent or undersocialized dog. To help prevent this, you’ll focus on managing the environment and therefore your dog’s arousal level by sticking to a schedule and providing structured down time. Some other tips to consider include:

1. Keep arousal level LOW during interactions both inside and outside – use a calm voice, provide structure to play, encourage sniffing, etc.
2. Reinforce/reward any of the calm behaviors your dog practices throughout the day (approaching with four feet on the floor, taking a deep breath, settling into a down position on their own, calm eye contact etc.) – this could be with something as simple as a calm, “good job, buddy”, calm petting, or tossing a snack
3. If they do mouth, respond neutrally by ending the interaction. If their arousal is not too high, you can simply stand up and turn to the side, and resume interaction once the behavior has ceased. If they are mouthing harder or the arousal level is higher, put a barrier between you and your dog (baby gates anywhere they will go is a great option).
4. Rotate through activities and spaces! Going for a walk, sniffing in the backyard, working on clicker training, or just hanging out and actively interacting with/supervising them, OR they’re working on a project in confinement (bully stick, pig ear, trachea, stuffed Kong). You can also confine yourself behind a pen if you are in the same space as them but aren’t able to give your full attention.
5. Very intentionally pick where you go and what you do with them – hold off on new environments while they’re settling in, and keep things low-key. No big adventures right off the bat, no visitors, no long walks through the neighborhood initially while they come down from the stressful shelter experience.

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**Training philosophy:** The philosophy that we use in our adoption centers and hope all of our clients will adopt is one based on a strong bond and clear communication between human and dog. We recommend arranging your dog's environment in a way that will make him most likely to succeed, using a rewards based methodology to teach the behaviors you want, and avoid using aversive stimuli to stop a behavior you don't want. We do not recommend the use of force as it can cause pain, injury, and/or mental suffering. To do that:

1. Manage the environment to prevent access to "wrong" choices, making it more likely to make the right choice.
2. Good, desirable behavior should *always* be reinforced, even if the behavior is as simple as standing quietly and looking up at you and the reinforcement is as simple as making eye contact with a smile and telling your dog they're good. You should never assume that they know they've done the right thing, make sure you tell them every time. Likewise, you should never assume they know what the right thing to do is – they won't know unless you teach them.
3. Undesirable behavior should be minimal (because you'll do such a good job of preventing it from happening!), but when it does happen your response should be to ignore, or to neutrally end the interaction. Even if you're really frustrated, avoid yelling at or physically manipulating your dog. The last thing you want to do is anything that will make your dog afraid of you – that will make training really difficult moving forward. Punishing a behavior does nothing to teach the dog what you'd like them to do instead. A better approach is to wait until you have both calmed down and try again to teach the right behavior. Any time the behavior you're trying to change does happen (your dog jumps up and grabs you or gets too excited), end the interaction quickly but neutrally, give your dog something to work on while they settle down, and make a mental note of what happened just before you saw those behaviors. That way you can start to predict what often leads to those undesirable behaviors so that you can better avoid them, and eventually use those as training moments to teach a more appropriate behavior instead.

The goal is to always be one step ahead of your dog, to **anticipate** when your dog might do something you don't like so that you can redirect them to something more appropriate *before* the unwanted behavior happens. Once the unwanted behavior happens, you've missed that opportunity to teach what you like instead. The more a behavior is practiced, the harder it can be to change.

Aim to say "yes" to your dog as much as possible – to do that, ensure your dog has access to the right choice! Hearing "no" all the time can be frustrating, and doesn't give any information about what you actually want from them. By focusing on arranging the environment and saying "yes" often, your dog will have more information about what your expectations are. Remember that you're on the same team – you succeed when they succeed!

Unfortunately, there is no way to predict how long a dog will take to learn new, more appropriate behaviors. Things that will affect their progress are your commitment to training every day, your commitment to a management plan that prevents opportunities to practice unwanted behaviors, and your sense of humor when things don't go quite as you had planned. Our team is invested in your success and serves as a constant resource for new families – people and dog. Don't hesitate to contact us if we can provide any additional support.