



# The Security Blanket (mat): notes by Kaye Hargreaves

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Aunty Kaye says: *"the emotions drive the behaviour to some extent."* Perhaps I ought to revise this statement, and say "to a large extent".

I have been using my own version of *Laura VanArendonk Baugh's method* - what I call the "Security Blanket" - for a couple of years now.

I use it:

- ✓ To establish calmness and relaxation before starting any other specific training, such as loose lead walking.
  - ✓ To give a dog a "bolt hole" or re-establish calmness when the dog has become stressed, aroused or challenged.
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1. The most effective way to do it is by means of pure shaping, no luring and no communication whatsoever other than the C/T. This is because this maximises the extent to which the dog internalises the behaviour.
  2. When I say "behaviour" I really mean the relaxed emotional state which underlies the behaviour. Although you are clicking successive approximations to relaxed body posture, the posture as operant behaviour is not important, except insofar as it indicates a growing degree of emotional relaxation. So it is the emotional state that is being shaped or developed.
  3. The lack of "guidance", luring or kickstarting means that the dog internalised the emotional state, and becomes more able to put him or herself into this state.
  4. This is a different exercise from a conventional lie down on the mat at home.
  5. Use a unique mat, not your dog's regular mat or bed. The emotional state can become conditioned to the mat. I recommend a light-weight towel, which you can take out with you, and toss on the ground if you need to calm your dog.

## Notes from VanArendonk Baugh, Laura, CPDT-KA KPACTP ***Fired Up, Frantic, and Freaked Out - Training Crazy Dogs from Over-the-Top to Under Control***

She offers a very detailed and specific training program.

Laura VanArendonk Baugh says:

*“...the dog is distracted, the dog is afraid, the dog is excited. But fundamentally, the dog is in a limbic, reactive state of mind instead of being in a cognitive, proactive state of mind, and that means he can’t — sometimes physically can’t — respond to known cues.”*

**Problem** – emotion and stress take over.

**Two approaches** – change the emotions to change the behaviour **OR** change the behaviour in order to change the emotions?

**Two tasks** – the dog must understand the cues (“training”) **AND** he or she must be in a mental or emotional state to be able to respond, to access learning.

This involves three things:

- 1) Threshold – to be raised
- 2) Skills – to be increased
- 3) Triggers – to be identified and dog to learn how to cope with them.

### Training requirements

#### Clicker

- ★ Highly recommended
- ★ More effective than verbal bridge

#### Mat (security blanket)

Not just a matter of teaching the dog to go to the mat – rather it is a matter of making the mat a totally safe, positive experience, which conditions the dog to relax.

#### Food rewards

Food is the preferred reward because play is arousing and petting or interaction is less powerful as a reinforcer.

#### Training method:

- ★ Teach the dog by shaping to go to the mat.
- ★ Shape relaxation (any posture or behaviour that indicates a relaxed state).
- ★ Give the dog a strong reinforcement history on the mat.

**TIP!** Don't leave your dog hanging in limbo.

**Training methods** – clicker training, targeting and going to the mat.

**Start** - with a nose to hand target.

- ★ Click and treat.
- ★ Toss the treat.

Tossing works especially for a dog that is “frozen” which is a form of stress – it will get the dog moving. Tossing the treat emphasises coming back to the mat, while rewarding in place emphasises relaxing on the mat.

- ★ Introduce the cue for targeting when the dog is doing it consistently and reliably.

### **Settling on the mat.**

Mat training should be done in an area of relatively few distractions and triggers.

Important to use shaping for going to the mat and lying down and settling – even if the dog can already do it on cue. The shaping process engages the dog's brain and produces more calmness.

Then start shaping relaxation - click any of the following:

- Head lowering to mat, chin resting on leg or mat
- Tail uncurling or resting on floor
- Hip rocking to one side
- Hind legs slipping further from body
- Hind legs extending behind body (“frog legs”)
- Sighing
- Blinking and soft eyes
- Ears relaxing
- Rolling onto one side

— anything that's an indicator of relaxation.

### **Introducing the trigger**

**Two methods:** 1. Dog is on mat when trigger is introduced 2. Present both mat and trigger and let dog choose, e.g. for door reactivity.

**Method 1.** Dog has been used to being clicked for relaxing on the mat. Introduce a quiet knock, not on the door. Click and treat.

**Step 1.** If dog moves off mat, just wait. Click if he or she goes back to the mat. Short sessions with a rapid rate of reinforcement.

**Step 2.** If the dog moves off the mat, just wait for him to go back, but do not click, The dog can earn another click by hearing another knock and waiting on the mat.

**Step 3.** Increase the intensity of the trigger.

**Step 4.** Move the mat to different places.

**TIP!** The dog should be staying on the mat at least 80% of the time before you raise your criteria.

**Step 5.** Introduce the real trigger.

There can be many mini triggers: Introduce them one at a time, until the dog is 80% reliable with all.

- ✪ Car engine or car door outside
- ✪ Front door handle rattle
- ✪ Sound of the security bolt
- ✪ The *pop* of the door seal breaking
- ✪ The squeak of the hinges
- ✪ The owner calling, “Just a minute, I’m coming”
- ✪ The sight of someone at the window
- ✪ The sound of a knock outside the door
- ✪ The doorbell (may require a separate introductory session just as the knocking did)
- ✪ The beep of an alarm system
- ✪ The door opening (again, one inch at a time)

Anything else which might be applicable.

It is possible to teach the dog an **“INITIATOR CUE”** – something which the dog does to indicate that she is ready for the trigger. She is in complete control.

**NEXT** – introduce other behaviours.

- ✪ Teach the behaviour.
- ✪ Introduce the cue.

**IMPORTANT!** Use the cue only once.

## **BE A SPLITTER, NOT A LUMPER!**

When teaching heeling, click and treat one step at a time. Reward and release. Don't go on letting the dog make mistakes and being brought back into heel position.

*If the dog surges ahead, abort the rep instead of trying to correct it. Reset and start fresh, so that no errors are included in any reinforcement.*

*If the dog surges ahead twice, reconsider; the dog has just informed us that he does not understand or is not yet capable of meeting this criterion.*

*For maximum effect, consider back-chaining the heeling approach — that is, starting just one step away from the decoy, then two, then three, etc.*

Introduce a decoy dog at a distance which will produce a slight reaction – noticing going a little tense – then present the mat – when the dog lies on the mat, C/T and take the decoy dog away.

- ★ *The mat — and its associated calm — was both positively and negatively reinforced. More importantly, the dog interrupted his own arousal and chose the mat over barking.*
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The dog is able to interrupt his own aroused reaction (even if just in the very earliest stages) and choose an alternate behaviour.

- ★ Increase the intensity of the trigger in very small increments.
- ★ Keep the training sessions very short – 90 seconds – repeat – then quit.

## **Training theory involved in the “Security Blanket” method**

- ★ **Classical counter-conditioning** is occurring as the learner relaxes and receives desirables in the presence of the trigger stimulus.
- ★ **Operant counter-conditioning** is occurring as the learner consciously chooses an alternate behavior and experiences reinforcement in the presence of the trigger stimulus.
- ★ **Systematic desensitization** is occurring as the learner is exposed to managed, successive iterations of the trigger stimulus.
- ★ **Positive reinforcement** appears in the form of tasty food (which also helps physiologically calm the learner) earned by conscious behaviors.
- ★ **Negative reinforcement** is used as the trigger stimulus retreats when the learner chooses an alternate response and relaxes.

## **Dealing with stress**

## Ways of reducing stress and arousal

Advice: *“Find ways to reduce her arousal/stress. Shorter training sessions (5 min. tops), do some massage/Ttouch work with her, etc. Identify each individual circumstance and problem-solve how you can change the picture to make it easier for her to handle.”*

When a dog is thinking and working, he or she is less able to be reactive – and vice versa.

★ *Rehearsing reactivity makes the behaviour stronger (and makes thinking rationally more difficult); and rehearsing thoughtful behaviour makes reactivity more difficult.*

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We can casually call this being “operant” or being “limbic”. Clicker training, for example teaching tricks, can help with this process.

Research indicates that predictability is important to anxious dogs. So is feeling in control. They find a familiar cue very rewarding – more so than the primary reward that follows doing the behaviour. Both the cue and the click can be more reinforcing than the food treat.

## How to avoid stress in the first place

Start training with few distractions.

Promote the right kind of socialisation.

### *Training*

1. Use reward-based training methods
2. Structure the dog’s learning to make it manageable – not too hard, not too easy – succeed in many small steps.
3. Give the dog opportunities to offer behaviour and get it right – make the right choice.
4. Emphasise “settling down” training.

Recognise that the dog can’t settle down 24/7, so make opportunities for constructive outlets:

- ★ incorporate control into activity
- ★ make it motivational – impulse control followed by release to act
- ★ beware of excessive exercise
- ★ build the dog’s capacity for mental activity
- ★ alternate between settling and activity

Build the dog's orientation to and, focus on handler – or, to put it the other way round, build the owner's leadership.