



Distractions, Our Puppy's Emotional States, & Thresholds

Introduction

If you are struggling with your puppy's behavior around certain distractions, then being aware of your puppy's emotional state and keeping them "under threshold" around those distractions will enable you to have more positive training experiences and hopefully avoid situations that your puppy may find overwhelming.

What Do We Mean By "Emotional State" & "Thresholds?"

Just like people, puppies can be triggered by certain things, distractions (often referred to as "stimuli" in dog training articles), that alter their emotional state into over-stimulation either through excitement, fear, or other emotions. When your puppy's emotional state has changed into over-stimulation, they are said to be "over threshold." We often refer to this as being in the "red zone", and we will talk about the zones later in this article. Once your puppy has gone over threshold and entered the red zone, communication shuts down and they are unable to learn or process any information you are giving them. The best option for both when this happens is to leave the situation, so this is a great time for using the Emergency Lure! When your puppy is under threshold, communication is happening and they're able to control their behaviors and be aware of their surroundings (even if they seem a little aroused, nervous, or on edge).

Threshold is the point at which they go from an emotional state where they can function and learn, to an emotional state of over-stimulation where they are zoned out from everything and are potentially triggered into exhibiting some undesirable behaviors in response to the distraction.

Triggers

Your puppy's triggers will vary depending on their stage of development, the environment, your proximity to the distraction, and other factors. Their reaction to the distraction when triggered will also vary and can include behaviors such as lunging, barking, and pulling on the leash, not taking treats, or ignoring you. For example, your puppy may be absolutely fine passing another dog that is on the other side of the street, but if you try and walk by right next to the other dog, your puppy is lunging on the leash and not listening to you. Puppies can be triggered by distractions such as:

- 🐾 Other Dogs
- 🐾 Children, who can move quickly and erratically
- 🐾 Adult humans (especially strangers, people wearing strange clothing like hats that your puppy hasn't seen before, or people approaching in a certain way)
- 🐾 Other animals such as squirrels, rabbits, or birds
- 🐾 Moving objects such as cars, bicycles, strollers, or skateboards

Remember that when your puppy is triggered by a distraction and their behavior deteriorates, they are not giving you a hard time, they are having a hard time coping with that situation!

Green, Yellow and Red Zones

Green Zone: (Under Threshold)

Either there are no trigger distractions present, or they are so far away that your puppy has not noticed them.

- 🐾 Your puppy's body language is totally relaxed (Loose body, face and ears relaxed) and showing no signs of stress or reactivity to distractions in the environment.
- 🐾 Your puppy is totally focused on you.
- 🐾 Your puppy can easily respond to cues.
- 🐾 Your puppy is willingly taking treats.
- 🐾 Learning is happening!

It is very likely that your puppy will only be in the green zone in places that are very comfortable and familiar to them such as your home and back yard. This is not a problem!

Yellow Zone (Approaching Threshold)

A trigger distraction is present in your environment, and your puppy has noticed it, but is not reacting to it in an undesirable way.

- 🐾 There may be a slight change in your puppy's body language (For example, a slight weight shift forward, closed mouth, ears up/forward, forehead wrinkles appear, tail stiffening or upright).
- 🐾 Your puppy is still willing to take treats from you and respond to cues.
- 🐾 Your puppy is still mostly focused on you but might be showing signs of being distracted by the stimulus such as looking around or sniffing.
- 🐾 Learning is still happening in the Yellow Zone, but be aware of your puppy's body language and your environment.
- 🐾 This is a great time to be playing the "Look at That" game!

The Red Zone (Over Threshold)

When your puppy has gone over threshold, they:

- 🐾 Will be completely focused on their trigger distraction.
- 🐾 Will likely have a very stiff body, possibly with raised hackles.
- 🐾 Might be pulling or lunging on the leash or straining towards the distraction.
- 🐾 Most likely won't be able to follow any cues you give them, and/or take treats.
- 🐾 No learning is taking place.

If your puppy is in the red zone, they need your help, not your judgement, so the best thing you can do is retreat from the situation, using the Emergency Lure if necessary, and allow your puppy to decompress until they are able to focus on you again.

To keep your puppy out of the red zone:

- 🐾 Be aware of your puppy's trigger distractions.
- 🐾 Get to know your puppy's body language.
- 🐾 Be aware of your environment so you can spot any trigger distractions.
- 🐾 Be proactive about leaving a situation before your puppy "boils over."
- 🐾 Always have an exit strategy.

Other Useful Curriculum Resources

- 🐾 Video - Look At That
- 🐾 Article - How and When to Use an Emergency Lure
- 🐾 Video - The Emergency Lure
- 🐾 Article - Canine Communication



Red Zone

- Your puppy is completely focused on the trigger distraction.
- Your puppy will likely have a very stiff body, possibly with raised hackles.
- Your puppy might be pulling or lunging on the leash or straining towards the distraction.
- Your puppy is unable to follow any cues you give them, and/or take treats.
- **No learning is taking place so retreat from the situation and decompress**

Threshold



Yellow Zone

- There may be a slight change in your puppy's body language.
- Your puppy is still willing to take treats from you and respond to cues.
- Your puppy is still mostly focused on you but might be showing signs of being distracted by the distraction.
- **Learning is still happening, but proceed with caution and be aware of your puppy's body language and your environment.**



Green Zone

- Your puppy's body language is totally relaxed
- Your puppy is showing no signs of stress or reactivity to distractions in the environment.
- Your puppy is totally focused on you.
- Your puppy can easily respond to cues.
- Your puppy is willingly taking treats
- **Learning is happening, so Go, Go Go!**