



## Treating Over-Arousal in Dogs

by

LAURA GARBER, CPDT-KA, CC, FFCEP, CBC

Arousal is a state in which a dog gets amped up, often occurring in play or in moments of excitement. Though it is typical of adolescent dogs, over-arousal can occur with any dog who does not have an emotional thermostat, and so such dogs need to learn how to better keep their emotions in check.

Arousal can take many forms, such as pulling, jumping, mouthing, leash-biting, and humping. The trick to helping a dog develop his emotional thermostat is by allowing him to experience manageable amounts of arousal and then having him offer a control behavior, like a sit or down, so that he can maintain control of himself. The *Arousal Protocol* is a key technique to this end...

### THE AROUSAL PROTOCOL: A DANCE STEP – STEP-STOP-SIT

The *Arousal Protocol* is a bit like a dance between partners: “*When I stand (still), you sit.*”

Start by teaching Fido how to sit. For those dogs who don’t know the verbal command (which is most of our dogs), lure the “sit” by holding a treat in your up-turned palm above Fido’s nose and moving it back over his head, effectively placing his butt on the floor. When he’s doing this with fluency, take a few steps, stop and cue the sit, rewarding with treats. Gradually start to fade the cue – remember that we want Fido to learn to take his position *automatically*.

Now, to build excitement and arousal, jog a few steps (\*), then stop and wait for the sit. Do this again and again until this becomes quite easy and automatic for Fido. Gradually increase the packets of arousal, like jogging several feet or hopping or skipping, always stopping and waiting for a sit. And begin to introduce situations that are exciting – when people visit the home or when you meet people while on a walk, when passing a barking dog or when playing fetch in the yard.

Doing this same kind of work to achieve the *down* part of the protocol (third step) would also be very valuable. And a wonderful side effect of this is that it will make Fido a perfect canine companion. Now, when you’re out for a walk, your dog will immediately sit beside you as you chat with the neighbors and will lie quietly beside you at the sidewalk café!

(\*) Note that the packet of arousal you use must *not* set off Fido’s arousal behavior or he will continue to experience that state of being out of control. Choose something that is easy for him to perform without triggering his arousal, even if it is just taking one step to the side and building from there.

For the dog who gets over-aroused during a game of fetch or tug or when he’s playing with a dog playmate, he must learn *games with rules*...

### GAMES WITH RULES

Your play together should be a structured exercise with rules. So, when playing fetch, as Fido returns with the ball, ask for a *drop*, then for a *sit* before throwing the ball and releasing him to retrieve it. In a game of tug, say “*take it!*” and offer an end of the rope for your puppy to grab. Then ask for a *drop*, then a *down* before releasing him to take the tug toy again. Over time, these games with rules will foster more respectful play habits. Don’t simply allow your puppy to leap up and take toys from your hands; this is rude as well as potentially hazardous to your hands. Tug a bit together, then let your arm hang limply and say “*drop it!*” (see below). If your puppy leaps to snatch the toy, say “*Uh uh!*” and ask for a “*sit*” (his “*please*”) before offering the toy again with a “*take it!*” If a tooth should touch your hand at any point, the game is over. Say “*Uh uh! Too bad!*” and take the toy and put it away out of reach of your puppy. This game is over!

Interleave quiet moments (15 seconds lying down quietly) between bouts of play at regular intervals. At first, your puppy will find it difficult, but soon he will go easily from “*let’s play!*” to “*settle.*” This will help him throughout his life in settling down from states of arousal.

### **“Drop It”**

This is the command to get your puppy to yield a toy or something else she’s carrying. If she’s got hold of something, say “*drop it!*” and then hold a treat to her nose. When she drops the toy, give her the treat and take the toy. Then offer her the toy back. The ultimate goal is for her to automatically yield the toy upon hearing the command, so make sure it’s the command first, then the lure on the nose, and finally the treat for the drop. There will be some articles for which you say “*drop it*” and *not* return them to her, like your sock, for instance. The key is to do so many repetitions with articles that you immediately return to her that she comes to think “*drop it*” is a win-win – she gets a treat for doing it *and* she gets the toy back.

*Note:* This same technique of interleaving play with a control behavior can work with arousal that occurs during dog play. Over-arousal in dog play can result in an unnecessary squabble. So allow your dog to play with his playmate for a short time, then take each dog by the collar and ask for a sit for a few moments and, when they’ve calmed down a bit, release them back to play. In so doing, you’re keeping a lid on their levels of arousal.

### **Humping and Mouthing and Leash-Biting, Oh No!**

Humping, mouthing, and leash-biting are common behaviors that occur in dogs who suffer from over-arousal. In the extreme, these behaviors can become quite dangerous, so it’s important that, from day one, you’re teaching your dog how to control his emotions and levels of excitement. One key way to do that is with the *arousal protocol* (see above), which helps him learn to manage small packets of arousal a little at a time. Also, the arousal protocol is teaching your dog companion behaviors, like lying quietly at your feet – a great improvement on humping and mouthing, don’t you agree?!

### Leash-Biting

This game becomes less fun if the human is not participating, so one thing you can try is to grab hold of your dog’s collar and drop the leash. Once dropped, he’ll likely lose interest in it and then you can quietly gather it up again, keeping it behind his head, while you try to get him thinking about other things, like loose-leash walking or some other training topic.

Another trick is to give your dog something to carry instead. Some dogs just want to have something in their mouths and a rope toy or a tennis ball will fit the bill. In so doing, you are breaking his *habit* of grabbing the leash for something more constructive.

Finally, you might try using a chain leash; most dogs don’t enjoy chomping on them. However, chain leashes are harder to handle so you’ll want to gradually fade its usage, first by double-leashing your dog and twisting the chain leash with a normal leash, and ultimately by using only the normal leash. However, once again, you will need to teach him other alternative polite walking techniques in the interim so that you’ve taught him a new habit along the way.

### **Equipment:**

When modifying a behavior, one must do two things: inhibit the bad behavior from happening, and then installing an incompatible behavior as an alternative. The use of a headcollar such as the **Gentle Leader** or the **Halti** can give a handler greater control over a dog’s head, which can help inhibit a dog’s humping, mouthing, and leash-biting. Then, at the same time as using this management tool, you need to train Fido in constructive alternate behaviors so that he’s learning *new habits*. In the long term, the equipment will no longer be necessary because he has learned how to be a better dog!