LAT ("Look at That"): A Training Exercise for Reactive Behavior

LAT stands for "Look at That" – a protocol developed by Leslie McDevitt, CPDT-KA, CDBC, author of Control Unleashed. Used properly, this training protocol can have a huge positive impact when working with reactive behaviors.

The keys to the LAT exercise are:

- Setting up a scenario where your dog can stay *below threshold* (where they can still look away from the trigger)
- Repeatedly *rewarding them for looking calmly at the trigger*

Looking at the trigger = good things happening, rinse and repeat. Practiced consistently, this can change your dog's conditioned emotional response (CER) to seeing a trigger from a negative one (scary or frustrating) to a positive one.

Why LAT?

Many of us were taught to try and make our dogs IGNORE a scary trigger. Why is this game teaching the opposite, when the trigger is what makes the dog bark? There are two main reasons why this exercise is ultimately more effective.

- **If something is scary, we want to keep an eye on it.** If there is a huge spider on the ceiling, would it make you more comfortable to be far away from it but know where it is, or to turn your back and trust your friend to let you know if it comes too close?

- **Our goal is coexistence, not pretending the trigger isn't there.** If we ultimately want our dogs to be able to go "huh, I see a dog, no big deal," then seeing a dog is what we want to practice! But we must *begin at a level where they can be successful and work our way up.* And sometimes this means creatively setting up practice scenarios!

Threshold: Your most important concept

A dog's "threshold" refers to the point at which a dog is no longer able to pay attention to anything but the trigger. Barking and lunging are certainly indicators of hitting threshold, but so are hyper fixation, and no longer taking favorite foods. There are 3 main things that control your dog's threshold:

- **Distance:** How far is your dog from the trigger? This is often the easiest variable to change!

- **Duration:** How long has your dog been able to stare at the trigger? Tension can build up to a blowout.

- **Intensity:** Is it a big barking German Shepherd or a teensy senior chihuahua? Is it quiet, or making noise? Did it startle your dog vs approaching gradually?

If your dog hits threshold, *your only goal should be to help them get BELOW threshold again.* Dogs who are over threshold aren't in a space where they are able to learn! It's our responsibility to change the environment so that they can be successful, and often the easiest way to do this is to make distance.

Before you begin:
- For this training game, *make sure that you are using a very high-value reward,* such as hot dogs, cheese, beef, chicken, bacon, pork chops, baby food, or whatever your dog likes best and does not get often. These can be cut into very small pieces for training.

- Make sure that you are in an area and at a time of day where *YOU can determine how close or how far you get to the trigger.* Whether you are working at a distance with real dogs, or at home with a DIY "trigger" (see below), make sure you have the option to move away if necessary.

Steps of LAT:

- **Keep your dog under threshold.** Make sure you are far enough away from the thing that triggers your dog's reactive behavior (dogs, people, men in hats, buses, etc.) so that they *can notice or look at it without going over threshold.* Sometimes, in order to keep a dog under threshold, this means you will likely have to start this game at a very large distance from the trigger! *If your dog is too close to threshold with the trigger at any distance, start practicing with a neutral target at home.* Examples might be:
    - An object your dog is likely to look at but not react (ex. traffic cone, favorite toy, bowl of food)
    - A novel sound played on a computer or phone (ex. bird noises, cats meowing, squeaky toy noises)
    - A known human friend walking back and forth as the "trigger" (can be played just across a room)

    Your goal is to set the dog up to LOOK AT THE TRIGGER WITHOUT REACTING.

- **Click/Treat the second they look.** The moment they look at the trigger click your clicker (or use a verbal marker) to mark that behavior, then deliver a delicious treat. The click marks the exact second that they did what we want; looked at the trigger! *NOTE: Deliver the treat in such a way that the dog is no longer looking at the trigger.* This might mean using your treat hand as a "magnet" to lure their nose away, or deliver it to the ground so that they break their gaze. Not because we don't want them to look but because we want them ready to look AGAIN!

For more information or to request behavior assistance, visit eastbayspca.org/behavior.

- **Repeat!** This might look pretty "rapid fire" at first, especially if the dog is extremely interested in the trigger.
- **Keep sessions short and positive.** Practice with a handful of 5-10 treats, *then take a 1-2 minute break.* If you are playing at home, love on your dog and tell them how amazing they are! If you are out in the world, INCREASE THRESHOLD by ducking behind an obstacle, increasing distance from the trigger, or getting into your vehicle. Practice this exercise until your dog is calmly looking for triggers in anticipation of the click.
- **Add the verbal cue.** When your dog is *already* offering a quick glance toward the trigger, add a cue such as "Look!" Your dog will quickly start to look at his scary triggers when you give the "Look!" cue and turn back to you for a reward. Keep rewarding their bravery!

If your dog does not turn back to you quickly, *they're probably too close to the trigger for their comfort, or your reward isn't high value enough.* Increase the distance between you and the trigger and try again. Gradually decrease distance as your dog learns to play the LAT game with things they find worrisome. *If you begin to see tense, nervous, or reactive behavior, you are likely too close to the trigger.* Help your dog create some distance by moving in the opposite direction. For assistance with this, see our *Emergency U-Turn* handout!

LAT Video Examples:

- **OVER THRESHOLD:** In this first video, the trigger is TOO CLOSE or TOO INTENSE! This is not a training moment, and the handler shuts off the video and makes distance after seeing it's not going to work. Watch Video

- **UNDER THRESHOLD:** In this video, the dog is under threshold and able to train, this time using a fake dog on the other side of the room with no collar noise (lower intensity, high distance). Watch Video

- **REAL WORLD:** And in this video, he's starting to get the hang of it. They've transitioned to an outdoor environment with a REAL dog! They do a quick session, and then she calls it and turns around to give him a break by getting some distance. The dog's body language is more relaxed, less tense, and he is also able to pay attention to things in the environment other than the trigger. Watch Video

LAT is an exercise that can take some time to get good at. The mechanics of handling a leash and clicker and treats can be challenging at first, which is another reason starting at home can be helpful. Progressing from indoors to a backyard to a quiet park can set both you and your dog up for success.

If you are interested in practicing these skills in a controlled environment, *East Bay SPCA offers Calm, Cool and Collected, a specialty reactivity group class, and "Polite Pooch Practice" sessions at our Oakland and Dublin facilities.* Once you've had an intro consultation to help build up your skills, our trainers can set up scenarios with collar sounds, fake dogs, and (when you're ready) real shelter dogs (at a distance).