

## COUNTER-CONDITIONING & DESENSITIZATION



When your dog is afraid of something, you will first need to change your dog's opinion before you will be able to do any training. If your dog is afraid of children in Halloween costumes, for instance, he cannot be expected to do a sit-stay for a picture like this one because he would be too upset to be able to respond to your request.

First, you need to **counter-condition** your dog to the stimulus that is causing the fearful reaction. In this case, you might hold the Halloween costume in your hand, show it to your dog, and then offer your dog a very yummy treat. You would repeat this several times until just the sight of the Halloween costume makes your dog's tail wag.

Then, you could **desensitize** your dog to a child in the costume by starting with the child at a distance far enough away that your dog is comfortable and not over threshold. Have your dog on leash, then have the child appear, let your dog see the child, then offer your dog a very high value treat. As the dog is eating the treat, the child should disappear behind a barrier. Repeat this again. As long as your dog is not over threshold, you can gradually have the child come 1 step closer each time she appears. She should appear each time without any added stressors like noise or motion (see stressors handout). If your dog gets more afraid, you should back down a step, get a few relaxed reactions, and then end the session. (*Note: If your dog is afraid of children, you would do this exercise with a child in regular every-day attire first.*)

Once your dog is comfortable with the sight of the child in the costume, you can have your dog approach the child, instead of the child appearing and disappearing. Reward your dog for "saying Hi" and showing confident behavior. Put yourself closer to the child in the costume and invite your dog to come closer to you for a reward. The end goal would be that when your dog sees the child in the Halloween costume, he is wagging his tail and willingly goes right up to her. Now you may ask your dog to do a sit stay! Counter-conditioning and de-sensitization take a lot of time and patience, but once your dog has a positive association, rather than a fearful response, you will be able to ask your dog to do a simple sit-stay command, without your dog being too stressed to be obedient.

***Important Note: If your dog has bitten in the past in response to a fearful stimulus, your dog should wear a well-fitting basket muzzle for these exercises and should be on a leash and Gentle Leader head collar.***