

Question: I have a problem with my 7-year-old golden retriever. Whenever someone rings my doorbell, she goes absolutely berserk! She practically makes tracks in the hardwood floor while flying to the front door, barking her fool head off. Then when I let the company in, she is just trembling uncontrollably with excitement, snorting loudly, swirling/twirling around, jumping like she has springs on her feet, all despite my commands to "sit" and "off". It is very embarrassing to say the least. I have instructed some friends to ignore her completely when they come in, but she is still just crazy. Other than this annoying habit she is a very well behaved, very sweet, pretty laid-back dog. She just gets so excited and loves *everybody*. She would never nip anyone while she is doing this, but it certainly could be frightening to someone, especially a small child. Can you offer some suggestions?

Answer: Teaching greeting manners to your dog may seem over whelming but it can be accomplished. Front doors are an emotionally charged area. When new people come, we are excited and happy, the visitors are excited to see us, and our dogs pick up on the energy. The front door can also be the place we leave with our pet when we take him or her on a walk and this adds to the keyed up behavior when they are in that area. Your dog has become classically conditioned to respond to the doorbell, just like Pavlov's dog. We need to recondition her behavior into something calmer and more acceptable.

This can be done with a combination of management and training. For management tools, you will need a six foot leash and a collar on your dog. It will also be helpful for your dog to know some basic obedience commands such as sit and stay. The leash will help you to control your dog by giving you something to grab if you need to move or stop her.

Beginning training can be done with family members. A family member should leave the house when your dog is not looking and wait outside the front door. Their job is to be patient, ring the door bell when asked, and play the guest. Be prepared for this set up training session by having your pup on the leash. Since your dog's excitement begins long before the door and then continues to escalate, we are going to begin the training a distance from the door. You will need to have a hold on the end of the leash but be careful not to tip your dog off. Sit quietly, pretend you're reading a book. When your dog is relaxed, ask your helper to ring the bell. Your wonderfully predictable dog will leap to her feet and prepare to take off for the door. You will not allow this to happen. Don't move, and wait until she calms down. This may take a bit. If she is too strong for you to hold, tie her to something solid. The main thing is not to allow her to repeat her old pattern of behavior. When she calms, you can ask her to sit, As soon as she does, reward her with a high value treat (for example: chicken, cheese).

After she has sat for a while, ask your helper to ring the bell again. It may take a few times for your dog to get the idea but you will find that although she may bark or whine once or twice, she will begin looking to your for that special something. It is very important for you to remain calm, no yelling or barking orders. Ask her to sit only after she has settled enough that she can pay

attention. It is also important for you to completely ignore her until she has calmed down. Don't reward the excitable behavior.

Once you have settled her down to the sound of the door bell, you can begin to move closer to the door. Walk calmly toward the door with her, leash in hand. If she begins to pull or gets excited, stop moving and remain where you are until she settles. Reward calm behavior. Keep practicing this until you can get to the door. Ask her to stay about six to eight feet away from the front door. As you reach to open the door, if she gets up, body block her from getting to the door and back her up to where you left her on a stay. Do not open the door until she is waiting patiently and at the required distance. As you open the door, if she breaks your barrier, shut the door and body block her back into place. Don't worry about answering the door. Your helper knows what their job is and will wait. Continue this until you can get your "guest" helper in the house and your dog is still calm. Reward good behavior each step of the way. Remember to remain calm. The more calm and in control you are, the quicker your dog will pick up on this new way of behaving.

Be patient with both your dog and yourself. She has been practicing this behavior for a while and it will take many repetitions to get consistent behavior. Don't move from one part of her training to the next until you have 98% correct behavior. Most importantly, stay calm.

If you are consistent, you will create a new set of behaviors that accompany the ring of the front door bell; ones that will ultimately give your loveable Golden what she wants most. Attention from visitors.