

# The Tellington TTouch Method: Groundwork for Dog-Dog Aggression and Reactivity

Jenn Merritt, CPDT-KA

**T**he Tellington TTouch Method can be a valuable approach for management and reduction of dog-dog aggression and on-leash reactivity, since TTouch directly addresses the tension, stress, fear, and anxiety that can be a part of the dog-dog aggression equation. TTouch bodywork, body wraps, and balanced movement exercises can give even novice handlers useful skills for managing and redirecting their reactive dog's behaviors. TTouch techniques can also be easily integrated with other reward-based approaches for reducing aggressive behaviors and reactivity. The techniques described are implemented only after thorough behavioral and health histories are collected along with observation for a complete assessment of the dog-aggressive/reactive dog.

The overall goals of the Tellington TTouch Method, as outlined by TTouch Training Instructor Debby Potts, have particular relevance when working with dog aggressive and reactive dogs:<sup>1</sup>

**Help the dog to be as comfortable in his body as possible.** Reactive and aggressive dogs tend to be in a constant state of body tension, preparing to react to perceived threats (other dogs). Think about trying to make important decisions while your body is wracked with tension. Once tension is released in the body through TTouch bodywork, body wraps, and balance movement, the mind can more easily process information instead of just reacting.

**Help the dog to be in the best physical, mental and emotional balance.** If the dog is lunging at the end of the leash, or constantly pulling forward, or feeling his airway constricted with a tight leash, he is out of physical balance. By improving the dog's physical state, getting him to balance on all four feet, we can also help him achieve a better state of mental balance.

**Help the dog to have self-control.** Even dogs that have great skill in obedience can fall apart emotionally or show a lack of impulse control outside the ring. The self-control aspects of TTouch encourage the dog to cope with his insecurities and impulses without having to constantly follow commands or be distracted by food rewards.

**Communicate clearly.** TTouch focuses on what we want the dog to do, not what we don't want, by using clear signals that the dog can understand. We also pay particular attention to canine body language and calming signals to monitor the dog's physical and emotional state, so that handlers can respond according to the dog's needs, and not push him over threshold.



Photo 1 - Groundwork.



Photo 2 - Royal is led through a PVC ladder with two points of connection on a step-in harness.



Photo 3 - Royal pausing in balance in a labyrinth.

In addition to TTouch bodywork and body wraps, TTouch "groundwork" exercises can be used to increase focus and confidence, decrease arousal, and encourage thinking versus instinctual or fearful responses.<sup>2</sup> In groundwork, the handler calmly leads the dog over objects placed on the ground, so the dog can think about where he is placing his feet and his body in space. Slow, non-habitual movement is encouraged to increase coordination, but also to give the dog new successful experiences that can transfer to real-life.<sup>3</sup> Examples of groundwork are a PVC ladder, plastic cones, cavaletti poles, different surfaces (smooth, rough, mats, carpet samples, etc.), a labyrinth constructed of rope or plastic poles or any number of other objects found >

at most dog training facilities or around the house. All groundwork objects should be safe for dog paws, without sharp edges, cracks or crevices.

Additionally, the handler uses gentle “ask and release” leash signals to encourage the dog to stop and pause. These signals are given with the leash and two points of connection, preferably a head harness and a step-in body harness or flat collar, so the dog can stop and stand in balance without any compression of his neck or airway. All these elements make groundwork an ideal technique for reducing reactivity.

TTouch Training Instructor Kathy Cascade uses TTouch groundwork in an integrated approach to working with dog-dog aggression, which she calls S.A.N.E. Solutions for Extreme Dog Behavior®. Preferring the term “reactivity” (as opposed to “aggression”) to describe specific reactions in specific contexts, Cascade feels that, in order for the reactive dog to become more adaptable in his responses to other dogs, we must first and foremost help him feel safe and balanced.<sup>4</sup> According to Cascade, “My goal is to reduce the physiological arousal through touch and purposeful movement exercises to help the dog attain physical balance – the ability to stand quietly with his weight equally distributed on all four legs with no pressure on the leash. When we can get a dog into a state of physical balance, physiological arousal decreases, and the dog is able to better cope with the environmental triggers.”

Cascade’s Reactivity Reduction Exercises are short 10-20 minute sessions of progressive movements involving the reactive dog and his handler and a non-reactive neutral dog and handler. The TTouch groundwork exercises are set up within a large space and used to engage the reactive dog’s mind and body in purposeful movement, instead of focusing on the neutral dog. The reactive dog can look at the neutral dog, but is gently redirected by his handler if staring occurs. As the reactive dog remains calm and comfortable, distance is slowly decreased and then the team can progress to the next step.

First, the reactive dog/handler follows the neutral dog/handler at a comfortable distance around the outside of the groundwork, handlers and dogs pausing together.

Future sessions can include new and multiple dogs for the reactive dog to work with. Cascade says this process gives the reactive dog “a completely new experience of feeling safe, relaxed, and in control while in a challenging environment or in the presence of other dogs or people, which previously would have elicited a fearful response.”

Cascade’s four keys to success in her Reactivity Reduction Exercises are:

**Remove pressure from the neck.** Getting pressure off the dog’s neck is a vital step in helping the dog feel safe. The last thing that a reactive or fearful dog needs is constriction of his airway or anything that promotes feeling trapped. Using two points of connection is also useful as a safety measure for dogs that tend to slip out of their harnesses or for dogs that redirect onto their handlers.



Photo 4 - Cascade acts as a visual barrier, stepping in at any point where eye contact may occur between the dogs. The black dog is the reactive dog and the white/brown dog is the neutral dog.



Photo 5 - Next, the reactive dog enters the labyrinth as the neutral dog exits, making sure that the dogs are not facing each other.



Photo 6 - Then the dogs are walked parallel to each other over and through obstacles with several pauses and enough distance so that the reactive dog remains comfortable.



Photo 7 - The next step is walking the dogs towards each other using barriers such as cones and the third person, allowing the dogs to stop and pause if the reactive dog is able to remain calm.

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**Allow the dog to have enough space.** A larger space gives the dog more options than a confined space. There must be enough space to allow the dog to feel safe.

**Start with a neutral dog.** It is especially important to work with a dog that can remain calm and non-reactive to another dog that may bark or lunge.

**Check your own emotions.** Handlers must be able to remain unemotional and calm, no matter how their dogs react.

Cascade believes that we give the reactive dog new choices by not making him feel trapped by a tight leash or a confined space. By giving him new experiences of feeling both safe and balanced in the presence of other dogs we can begin “building trust, one experience at a time.”

### Case Study: Hexa

Hexa is a two-year-old female German Shepherd with a history of reactivity (hard staring, barking, lunging, hypervigilance) towards other dogs both on and off leash since she was a puppy. She is slow to recover after a reaction. Hexa’s reactivity is especially challenging as it has been ongoing and intensifying for much of her life. Hexa’s owner has tried a variety of techniques to reduce her arousal and her outbursts with limited success.

Over the course of three weeks, I met with Hexa and her owner for three 45-minute sessions as we progressed through many of the Reactivity Reduction Exercises. During our first session, I introduced Hexa’s owner to TTouch earwork and gentle bodywork exercises to relieve Hexa’s body tension.<sup>5</sup> Next, I fit Hexa with a Thundershirt™ body wrap to give her more awareness of her body.<sup>6</sup> Lastly, I helped Hexa’s owner become comfortable and confident with using two points of connection. Using a leash attached on a head harness and body harness, she could more easily redirect Hexa’s eyes if she began staring.



Photo 8 - Hexa and Sharon moving together over cavaletti poles.

We introduced Hexa to groundwork exercises including a PVC ladder, rope labyrinth, cavaletti poles, and varying surfaces in a large outdoor space. At a distance that Hexa could handle, we introduced a very lifelike stuffed dog and “handler.” Hexa showed initial reactions (staring and a few barks) towards the stuffed dog and had difficulty moving through the groundwork without knocking her feet on the obstacles, but did not escalate and showed marked relaxation and more fluid movement as the session progressed and we continued to move through the groundwork.

During our next session, we introduced a live neutral dog at a distance of about 100 feet as Hexa and her owner moved through the labyrinth, ladder, etc. Hexa’s arousal increased significantly as the neutral dog and handler moved, so we kept the movements minimal and the distance around 100 feet.

During our third session, Hexa and the neutral dog moved in a large circle together around the groundwork equipment with a third person standing between them at a distance of 20 feet. As we progressed through the Reactivity Reduction Exercises, Hexa not only became more able to >



Photo 9 - Hexa and Sharon focus on walking through the ladder and not on the neutral dog.

tolerate the neutral dog's presence and movements without reacting, she looked at the neutral dog, then looked away easily, while standing balanced on all four feet. Keeping Hexa on task, focusing on the groundwork was key for keeping her arousal low and her reactions abated. Her owner reports that Hexa's overall arousal around other dogs continues to be reduced and she has begun to replicate groundwork in her backyard.

In conclusion, dog-dog aggression and reactivity present a range of challenges for dog trainers, handlers, and the dogs themselves that sometimes become lifelong management issues. Integrating Tellington TTouch techniques into dog aggression and reactivity treatment plans can offer dogs and their families an effective, gentle, and safe approach to overall reduction of reactivity, especially for dogs that have not shown improvements with other methods.

### Endnotes

- 1 The Integrated Animal Website. *Tellington TTouch Overall Goals – A Process for “Just Do The Work”*. Retrieved September 2010 from <http://www.integratedanimal.com/downloads/TTouchGoals.pdf>.
- 2 Tellington-Jones, L. (2001). *Getting in TTouch with your dog: A gentle approach to influencing behavior, health, and performance*. North Pomfret, VT: Trafalgar Square Publishing.
- 3 Hood R. (2003). A TTeam playground for higher learning. *TTEAM Connections*, 3:22-28.
- 4 Cascade Animal Connection Website. *Reducing reactive dog behavior*. Retrieved September 2010 from: <http://www.spiritdog.com/reactivearticle.htm>.
- 5 Merritt, J. (2010). The Tellington TTouch method: TTouch bodywork for stress reduction, enhanced learning, and confidence. *The APDT Chronicle of the Dog* 3:33-35.
- 6 Merritt, J. (2010). The Tellington TTouch method: Body wraps for calming, focusing, and anxiety. *The APDT Chronicle of the Dog* 2: 23-25.

Jenn Merritt, CPDT-KA, is a Tellington TTouch Companion Animal Practitioner and owner of Blue Dog Creature Coaching in Efland, NC. She presented "Tellington TTouch in the Canine Classroom" and "Training Canine Companions for Lifelong Partnership with Autistic Children" at the 2009 APDT Conference in Oakland, CA. She can be contacted at [jenn@bluedogk9.com](mailto:jenn@bluedogk9.com).



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