



The Misconception of Happy vs. Over-Exuberant Dogs

Written by: Sam Kabbel, CPDT-KSA

We frequently receive questions from families about their over-exuberant dogs. They describe these dogs as super happy or super joyful yet either rude, or difficult to control. Here are two email inquiries we received that are similar in nature. While we helped these clients privately, I wanted to address a common behavior and misconception in an article so everyone can benefit.

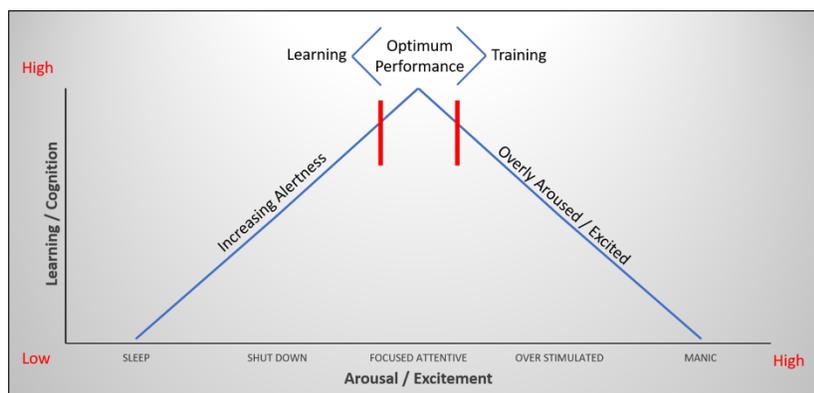
Question #1:

Wiggles is my most adorable 7-month-old Boxer. She earned her name because she wiggles and jumps in utter love of other dogs and people. She gets so excited when she sees people and other dogs that she pulls and does these little jump-lunges when she sees them. She cannot wait to get to them! When she greets them, she is a little overwhelming in her happiness. She jumps up and even leapfrogs over the dogs because she is so happy. When she greets people, she jumps up into the air like Tigger and has knocked small children down. How can I curtail her exuberance without squashing her happiness?

Question #2

I have a 2-year-old Lab mix that I adopted from a shelter when she was 9 months old. She is such a wonderful pet, but I am confused by her behavior in two situations. She gets so excited to go for walks! I can hardly get her leash on her because she is jumping, barking, and spinning in joy. But then doesn't want to walk once we get outside. She also so gets so excited when we get ready to go for a ride in the car but then doesn't want to get into the car. She sits still and trembles in the car until we get to the park and then she is happy again.

What these people are describing is more of an overstimulated or overexcited behavior that is almost a manic state. People describe this behavior as joyful and motivated by utter happiness. If you have read my article on THE EMOTIONS OF PETS, you will remember that one of the first primary emotions that we and our pets experience is excitement or arousal. Are you surprised that excitement or arousal is an actual emotion and not just a behavior? Joy or happiness is a completely separate emotion. Dogs that become so excited that they are unable to control themselves are not necessarily experiencing joy. They have an impulse control issue. Let's look at the following chart.



In this chart you can see that these super excited dogs are unable to think clearly. As arousal or excitement increases, cognitive ability decreases. This means that when over-aroused, dogs are unable to think through a social negotiation or recall their training. Social negotiations involve an interaction or a behavior and a response. Basically, “If you do this, then I do this. Then you do this in response to what I did.” When dogs are this excited, they are merely ‘visiting’ their exuberance on others and this is not a good behavior sequence.

Many people think that a well socialized dog is super happy to see other dogs and people. They envision play and exuberant greetings. Actually, a well socialized dog knows how to behave in many situations. They know how and when to play; how to greet people and dogs in an appropriate manner; and how to be calm and neutral when the situation is appropriate. Most people comment when they see wonderfully calm dogs out in public, but they then see their own dog’s “not calm” behavior as super happy.

The most important part of socialization is learning to be neutral. Unfortunately, we tend to almost create this excited behavior in our attempts to socialize our dogs or puppies. We encourage this exuberance, and some owners ramp their dogs up even more with excited talk prior to walks or greetings. We allow our dogs to pull to get to dogs and people in their excitement with the belief that this is how to properly socialize. With this sequence, a dog becomes too excited and can become frustrated with the leash restraint by not getting where he wants fast enough. Some dogs eventually become frantic or even angry with that frustration and then it may become excitement-based aggression as they mature or as the behavior progresses. People become confused because their dogs are so good with people and other dogs when they are off leash, but these same dogs can become leash frustrated or leash aggressive. This is not the proper socialization.

Dogs need to learn to take in things in their environment as they come instead of “binging” on their environment where they always want the next exciting thing. Dogs need to learn to simply be present and not always explore or sniff. They need to learn to be calm and neutral toward people and dogs unless the situation calls for interaction. We unwittingly train our dogs to think every person and every dog is there for them to play with and then wonder why they can’t contain

themselves when we take them to outdoor, dog-friendly restaurants or other environments. We need to slow down their training and slow down their socialization to help them stay attentive and focused instead of manic and over-aroused.

In the second question, we see that the owner is confused about why her dog is so “happy” to go for walks or rides in the car but then doesn’t seem to want to be there once they get started. It isn’t so much that the dog is happy, rather the dog is excited or aroused. Again, this is a primary emotion they are experiencing, it doesn’t necessarily mean they are excited to go for a walk or go for a ride. In this situation, we need to address two things: the manic behavior of getting leashed and then the reluctance to go once he is leashed.

It isn’t good to get your dog too excited to do something or go somewhere. It is better to make these transitions calm and orderly so they can either be trained or recall their training. Excitable dogs need training, but that training should be aimed at calming down in order to be in an optimal learning state. Dogs who are super excited to see other dogs need to calm down and learn more appropriate greetings. Ideally, we need to change our belief that excitement is happiness and understand that these are two separate emotions. Dogs can be calm and happy. Training shouldn’t squash happiness. Dogs need to learn impulse control just like children do. Socialization is not just about play and exuberant greetings.

If you feel that your dog fits these scenarios, contact us so we can establish a training protocol that aims for focus and attentiveness while still allowing your dogs to experience joy and fun. And if your dog is exuberant and then reluctant, let’s get to the bottom of that as well to better understand why your dog is reluctant and work to meet your dog’s needs with this behavior.