

TRAINING YOUR DOG

By Cheryl Minnier
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Dogs learn differently than people. They are amoral, that is they do not operate on the principal of right or wrong. They operate on a stimulus-response principal. If an action produces a pleasant response, the action will be repeated. If an unpleasant response is elicited, the behavior will be avoided (if the response is stronger than the initial reason for the behavior). For instance, if a dog is corrected for trying to mount a bitch in season, he probably will not stop because the drive that prompted this behavior is extremely strong. If, however, a dog is corrected for chewing on the leg of a table and is able to satisfy his need to chew with another object, then he will probably leave the table leg alone. In order to teach the dog the behaviors you want or don't want, you need to provide a pleasant stimulus (i.e. praise or food) when he does something right and provide an unpleasant stimulus (i.e. a stern NO or a quick jerk on the collar) when he does something you don't want.

Timing is everything in dog training! If you see the dog misbehaving and wait 10 minutes before correcting him, the dog will assume he is being corrected for whatever he was doing immediately before you corrected him. If this was laying quietly at your feet, you have just made a grave mistake! **IF YOU CANNOT CORRECT THE DOG INSTANTANEOUSLY, YOU CAN ONLY CORRECT YOURSELF FOR MISSING AN OPPORTUNITY TO TEACH YOUR DOG THE RIGHT BEHAVIOR!** Chalk it up to experience and try to catch the culprit in the act next time. For example, if you come home to find your favorite shoes in tatters and the dog sleeping comfortably on the couch and you begin screaming at the dog, he will associate your coming home with a reprimand. That you are upset about the shoe will not enter his mind, even if you hold the shoe in front of his face and shake it. He will probably be so nervous the next time you leave that destructive behavior is a certainty. His sheepish look when you return is not a sign that he "knows he did wrong" it is a learned response. This is a good reason to crate the dog when you cannot be with him until he has learned what is acceptable. It is unfair to assume that dogs know the rules and then correct them when they misbehave. Make sure you have taught them what is expected before they have a chance to mess up!

The same principle of timing applies to praise. If the dog is doing something right, praise him instantly. If you wait until he stops, you are praising him for stopping. For instance, if your dog sits when strangers come to the door and you wait until he gets up to walk away to praise him, you have taught him to walk away! The best way to teach a dog is to reward the behavior you want and correct the behavior you don't- when it is happening. If you doubt your ability to teach or a dog's ability to learn simply pick up his food bowl, he has learned to come right away; or sit down to watch TV-if your dog comes over to be petted, you have taught him this. We are always teaching something, we just need to learn to make sure it is what we intend to teach.

Another very important principal in dog training is tone of voice. A correction should be given with a growl in your voice not by screaming or with a normal tone of voice. Sound ferocious! Praise should be given in an upbeat, happy voice. It should instantly get the dogs attention and

make his tail start wagging. If you don't get this response, practice until you do. You also need to be consistent with commands. Saying "sit" one time and "sit down" the next will only confuse the dog. Pick one word and stick with it. Keep commands short and do not repeat them over and over. The most common mistake the novice will make is to look at the dog and plead "sit, sit, sittttt pleaseee."

Using the principles of stimulus response, many common behavioral problems can be solved. Some examples are:

CHEWING: If a dog is chewing on a forbidden object, correct him with a stern NO while he is chewing. Immediately give him an acceptable object to chew and praise him when he does so. Remember, puppies have to chew so make sure the dog knows which things are acceptable. Don't confuse him with many chew toys, stick with one or two and never use old shoes or socks unless it is okay for him to chew new ones. Chewing may be the result of boredom or anxiety. Correct these problems and you may end the behavior.

BARKING: Barking is a dog's way of communicating. If he is alone for long stretches he will bark because he is bored and miserable. Solution: spend more time with him, give him more exercise. If he is barking from separation anxiety, gradually teach him it's okay to be alone by leaving for short periods and praising him when he behaves. If he is barking because he wants out of a crate and you let him out while he is barking, you have rewarded and reinforced the behavior. Never let a barking dog out of a crate. Correct him with a stern QUIET and wait until he has been quiet for a few seconds before letting him out. A half a glass of cold water or a squirt gun can be used as a last resort on incorrigible dogs, but ignoring them until they finally shut up and then praising them and letting them out is the most effective solution.

JUMPING: Trying to be quick enough to correct this problem is usually futile and frustrating. Instead simply teach the dog that the correct way to greet you is with a sit. If he is told to sit and responds, he isn't jumping.

WALKING ON A LOOSE LEAD: To teach your adult dog to walk on a loose lead, put the dog on a training collar and 6 foot lead. Begin walking, as the dog nears the end of the lead quickly turn in the opposite direction and walk rapidly away so that the dog hits the end of the leash with a snap. He will correct himself. When he rushes forward to be in front again simply repeat the process and head in another direction. Continue this for several minutes until the dog has received several corrections. He should quickly learn to keep the lead slack and pay attention to where you are going. Praise him whenever he is by your side and paying attention to you. There are also collars and head halters that discourage pulling. The Gentle Leader or Halti is one such collar.

CRATE TRAINING: Crates are not a punishment for dogs and should not be used as such. They are a safe place for a dog to be, satisfying his natural instinct to find a den. Most dogs will seek out a crate for nap time or whenever family life gets too hectic. Crates can be overused. Don't expect a dog to be happy about being crated if he spends 8-10 hours a day in one. To teach him to stay in a crate, be matter of fact and remember, never let a barking dog out of a crate.

Place him in with a marrow bone or nylabone and he will most likely adjust quickly, associating the crate with good things. It is also helpful to hide small treats in his crate at random times, so that occasionally he finds a goodie when he wanders in. He'll quickly come to associate the crate with positive things.

HOUSEBREAKING: To housebreak a dog, he must not be allowed unsupervised time outside of a crate. You must watch him at all times when he is loose. Remember, if you don't see it happen you can only correct yourself because it is your fault. To teach a dog the correct place to go to the bathroom, praise him when he goes there. Crate the dog, when he wakes up or after he eats, take him to the correct spot and wait. When he goes, praise him lavishly. Should he start to go in the house, tell him NO! and take him outside immediately. When he finishes outside, praise. The secret to quick housebreaking is to avoid accidents at all costs. This starts a pattern that is very hard to break. It also helps to remember that puppies don't always "empty" the first time. It's not uncommon for puppies to pee and then pee again 10 minutes later. If your puppy is like this, wait outside for awhile before bringing him in.

Allowing a dog to have his own way is cruel to the dog. Being alpha is a tough job and a lot of work for him, he'd probably rather not have to do this. You are not doing him any favors by being overly permissive. He will only have to be corrected more sternly to break him of the habits you have allowed him to develop. If you want to be kind, teach him to be a well behaved member of the family as quickly as possible.

Don't confuse permissiveness with affection! All dogs need large doses of love and affection. The best place to learn to "speak dog" is at a training class conducted by a qualified dog trainer.