



How Dogs Learn

*I hope you find this read informative and helpful for your relationship with your dog(s). Some of this content was taken from material from dog*tec, a group of dog trainers & professional educators that provide content for dog trainers. Some of the content comes from Diane Abbott, CPDT a great trainer in the CT. And some of the content comes from yours truly, Juliet Whitfield, CPDT. All of this information is science based; meaning none of the authors made it up, it's all been proven.*

Dogs Learn in Two Ways

Learning by Association

The first way dogs learn is by Association (it's an emotional response)

Human example

We humans learn by association, too. For example, when you meet someone for the first time you come away with an association—either positive, negative, or neutral. If you really enjoyed your interaction with the person, you are likely to be really happy to see them again. If you found them to be difficult or argumentative when you see them again, you might get that little pit of dread in your belly—you have formed a negative association with that person.

Human-dog comparison

Dogs experience the world this way, too, only they rely on this learning far more than we do. They are constantly forming associations—safe, dangerous, is it good, bad, or neutral for me. These associations inform the decisions they make and the reactions they have to various situations and stimuli.

Dog example

A common example of associative learning in dogs is their reaction to a food bowl, even an empty one. Pull out a dog dish and the average pup will jump into leaps of joy. This is because they've come to learn that bowls predict food, so they love bowls. In other words, dogs associate bowls with food.

Implications

The implications of this are enormous. It's important to remember that what we do influences the associations the dog is making while in our presence. Here's an important example: Say I'm walking Fido and he has a reaction of too much excitement when he sees another dog. It could be just that he barks or whines, or pulls towards the dog, but I don't like it. I shout, "No!" and give him a leash correction. This happens each time we see a dog. Pretty soon Fido's reaction to other dogs is terrible, he barks and growls and lunges and snaps because I have built a negative association: dogs equal pain. I have taught him to dislike or fear other dogs. I have the potential to take a pup that either likes others or doesn't yet know how he feels about them and make him fear aggressive, aggressive, or fearful around other dogs. This is the main drawback



to using punishment; it has a lot of side effects due to learning by association or emotion. And don't forget that one of the negative associations is with the punisher, which can affect the bond between person and dog. It's not that punishment doesn't work—it's that learning by association or emotion always comes along for the ride.

What could I do instead? Say that every time Fido sees another dog he gets very excited? We can practice a few behaviors that Fido knows, like sit, look at me, shake, reward with lots of treats. One behavior will do, but you will need to repeat many times. It's important to keep the mood upbeat and happy.

Say Fido has a negative association with other dogs and we have to reverse it. Treats are a good way to do this. But what if Fido is so upset that he won't take the treats? If you're afraid of spiders and I put one right in front of you, or keep you in a room with it for a long period of time, it's going to be hard for you to listen to my instructions to sit down and stop screaming. But if I hold the spider 20 feet away, and only bring it in for short periods of time, and maybe distract you with some conversation or chocolate, things are going to go better for you; you'll be able to hear me when I ask you to take a seat and compose yourself.

We need to do the same things for dogs who are afraid of something or upset by it. We move Fido farther away from the upsetting object, try to keep the situation brief, and distract him with our cheerful voices and treats. Remember, we're not rewarding him for his barking or growling—he's too upset to control his behavior. We are trying to affect his emotional state so that we can then ask for different behavior.

When your dog is very young, he is making associations with everything.¹ As he matures, he's made a lot of associations, but we've all known of an adult dog who has one experience that turns the dog into a shaking mess, like fireworks.¹ Just like humans, dogs can make new positive or negative associations throughout their life time.¹ This is why keeping treats on you when out and about is always a good idea.

Learning by Consequence

The second way that dogs learn is by consequence, or by doing.

Human example

I can tell a school-age child that I will take him out for ice cream when I see him next week to celebrate his good report card. When he eats the ice cream, he will understand that he is being rewarded for grades he got a week ago, which he got because of work he did over the course of a period of months. The child connects the ice cream with the good report card and hard work.

Human-dog comparison

A dog could never understand this; it's way beyond their ability to connect events over time like this. Dogs learn by consequence like we do, but for dogs the consequence has to be immediate; it must occur right on the heels of the action that caused it.

Dog example

For example, say I lure Fido into a sit with my hand. Then I rummage around for the treat, trying to figure out where I put it. In the five seconds between the sit and the treat, he sneezed, sniffed the ground, and looked left. All of a sudden there was a treat. As far as he's concerned, he got it for looking left. You'll eventually teach Fido to sit, but it'll take a while.



Implications

This is why we use the marker word “yes” it allows us to tell Fido the precise moment he won the treat. Once we’ve “yes” or marked the behavior we buy ourselves a few seconds to get the treat out of our pocket because Fido knows what he’s getting his treat for. The “yes” word is a reward marker—it marks the moment the reward was won. To teach Fido to know that the “yes” means a treat is coming we use learning by association—we pair the “yes” with treats. Every time he hears the “yes”— he gets a treat. Pretty soon Fido understands that the “yes” means treat, that the “yes” predicts a treat. So even when we’re working with learning by consequence associations are constantly being made.

Overall Implications

There are two main concepts to take from these ideas:

One, dogs learn in two ways by association/emotion and by consequence/doing.

And two, that because of these two ways of learning, dogs see the world in two ways: What’s safe/good for me and what’s dangerous/bad, and what works and what doesn’t.

The safe/dangerous outlook on life comes from learning by association or emotional response. When a dog is punished for peeing on the carpet in front of you, they don’t learn inside/outside—they learn that it’s not safe to pee in front of you, but it is safe to pee when you’re not there, so they sneak off to another room.

The “what works/what doesn’t work” outlook on life is from learning by consequence or by doing. Every dog tries staring at the refrigerator. After a while they give up and don’t bother trying again because staring at the fridge doesn’t seem to work; it never opens. They also try staring at their people at the dinner table. Every once in a while someone gives in and gives them a bite. Staring at people while they eat works, so dogs continue to do it and a table beggar is born.

The important point here is that Fido’s world is safe/dangerous and works/doesn’t work, NOT right/ wrong. Dogs do not have the capacity for those abstract thoughts. Dogs don’t do things we don’t like in order to get back at us or be stubborn or naughty. This is a myth. Dogs just do what’s safe and what works. That’s all. If Fido barks at you to throw the ball and you throw it, rest assured he’ll do that again. If you ignore the barking and ended the game he’ll eventually give up and try something else. He’s not trying to be obnoxious; he’s just doing what works. Similarly, if you ask a dog to sit and he doesn’t sit he’s not being stubborn; he’s just not trained well enough yet. So be patient with Fido and be careful what you pay attention to and what you ignore, and the ways in which you do so.

There’s the Disney ideal of dogs who just want to please us (and save us from falling into the well!), but the truth is dogs are all about “what’s in it for me?” We need to provide something of value for our dogs if we want to have success from our expectations of them.

WOULD YOU KEEP GOING TO WORK FOR NO PAYCHECK? DON’T EXPECT YOUR DOG TO EITHER. Humans and dogs all expect a reward for good behavior and good deeds!



Encouraging Good Behavior

Your dog is not born knowing your rules and what good manners are in a human environment. They do not purposely misbehave. If you want him to learn your rules and good house manners, it is up to you to guide and teach them.

Just as your dog does not purposely misbehave, he/she also doesn't know that they are doing something that you like unless you tell him. The best way is to mark the behavior with a sound like a "yes" followed by a reward so that they learn to associate a reward with the behavior that you like. A reward is anything your dog finds enjoyable, such as a food treat, praise, play, a walk, etc.

Catch and Reward Good Behavior

Whenever you see your dog behaving the way you like, such as looking to you for permission to do something, chewing on his bone, licking you instead of nipping, going to the bathroom outdoors, greeting you without jumping, not barking at a passing dog let them know that they are doing something that you like. Timing is everything, make sure you mark the behavior and give rewards the instant your dog does something good. They should be given for all the little things he/she does throughout the day. When you give rewards you are reinforcing good behavior. The more reinforcements you give your dog, the more they will want to continue those behaviors in hopes of a reward.

Real Life Training

It's easier to incorporate training into your daily life. For example, if your pooch wants to play, ask him/her for a "Sit" or "Down" first. If your pup wants to say hello to your guests, insist that he/she sit politely for petting. Ask your pooch to "Wait" at the door until you release them before going outside. Ask him/her to "Sit" before lowering the food bowl to the floor. These are the behaviors that you need for a polite dog, so work on the most important behaviors in your daily life and you will have a very "trained up" dog.

Oops! Behaving Badly

There will be times when your dog is behaving inappropriately and you will have to let them know immediately. There are various ways to convey this to your dog, all of which are humane and effective if used properly.

NRM – No Reward Markers

Teach your dog a specific word or sound that means "stop what you're doing." Examples of a NRM might be "Enough", "Ah,Ah", "Hey", etc. Your reprimand should be said without emotion or display of anger. There is no need to shout or scream. In fact, the less you yell at your dog the better. Save this for when the dog has something that can cause serious harm to him/her or they are doing something that is life threatening. When you see your pooch doing something inappropriate, like sniffing around the garbage can; quickly interrupt the behavior by calmly walking to them and removing them from the situation. If you shout across the room and storm toward the dog, your dog is most likely going to run and be scared of you. Instead, remain calm and redirect him/her to another activity that **is** acceptable like chewing a bone or playing with a toy. Once your dog learns the significance of the NRM you won't need to physically remove them- they will come away by themselves.

Do not use your dog's name as a reprimand. Your dog should always associate his name with good things.



Ignore Inappropriate Behavior

Ignoring bad behavior is a powerful way to discourage behaviors that are designed to get your attention. Probably the most common way for a dog to get attention is through barking. Barking tends to get a reaction. For example if he/she is barking to get out of the crate and you remove them, they quickly learn that this is the way to freedom. Yelling at your dog to “be quiet!” only brings about more barking. You have given them attention (AND you’re barking along with them, so this must be the thing to do after my entire human is doing it too!) Negative or positive, it’s still attention. If you are confident your dog is barking to gain your attention, the best method is to ignore the behavior, turn your head away and ignore them. When you have 3 full seconds of quiet, mark it and reward with your attention. If you are consistent, your dog will quickly learn that barking causes you to ignore them and quiet gets your attention.

If you have inadvertently rewarded the behavior by giving them attention in the past, it might be tough at first to break this habit. Your dog has gotten used to barking for attention – that behavior used to work. Why doesn’t it now? Your dog might try even harder by barking more often, barking more loudly, being more persistent. It may seem that the behavior is getting worse. Your dog is thinking “Hey this has always worked, what’s going on? I’ll just try harder, bark louder, surely that will work” We call this an “Extinction Burst”.....when the behavior gets temporarily worse (you aren’t responding like you used to and pooch is frustrated), hang in there, don’t give up now! You are on your way to success, pup will realize there is no pay off for the barking behavior and notice that quiet is getting the attention. The inappropriate behavior may come back every now and then. This is called spontaneous recovery. It too is only temporary, so stick to your guns!

Always remember to replace bad behaviors with good behaviors. If you plan to ignore your pup for barking, you will be more likely to succeed if you also teach them an acceptable way to gain your attention. Teach him/her that if they sit in front and watch you, you will pay attention to them. If he/she barks, you will look away until you have at least 3 full seconds of quiet.

Time Outs

Suppose you have just returned from your daily walk and you're ready to prepare dinner. You give him/her a bone to chew on, but he decides to jump up at the counter to get your food. A NRM.....”Ah, Ah” should end the behavior. Then direct them to something appropriate like chewing a bone or stuffed Kong. If he/she persists, calmly and unemotionally remove the dog to a time-out area. A time-out area can be a crate or small room. Time them out for no more than 2 minutes. Anything longer than this is not a learning opportunity and is less effective. If your dog is quiet for 30 seconds, let him/her out and return to what you were doing before. Ignore barking or whining until they stop, and then let him/her out. Be patient – they will eventually stop! **If you let them out before they stop barking, they will bark and whine even longer and louder the next time.** If he/she lies down and chews their bone quietly praise them for doing what you want. If the scenario occurs again, repeat the above steps. For some pooches this may have to be repeated over and over again, even many times in a day for this to be effective.

Withdrawal of Expected Rewards

If your dog misbehaves, you can communicate your displeasure by holding back on a reward your pup is expecting, **provided that it relates to the misbehavior.** For instance, you want to teach your dog to sit and wait until you place the food bowl on the floor and tell them that it’s “OK” to start eating. Some dogs are so excited they may just jump up and eat before the invitation. The instant your dog gets up from the sit, take the food bowl away. When he/she sits



again, lower the food bowl. Continue this process until your pooch learns that if he gets up before you invite them to get up, the meal reward will disappear. If they are patient and wait, they will get more food quickly.

You can use this process in many ways. For example, don't fight to get the leash on your dog to go out. Ask them to sit so you can easily hook them up. Routinely brush him/her before eating. If he/she bites the brush, remove the food bowl. If they allow a few seconds of brushing then put the food bowl down to eat. If he/she grabs at treats in your hand before permission, remove the treat.

Don't give in. **You must be as persistent as your dog.** When you are consistent he/she will learn that they won't get the reward until they control their behavior.

Repetition

Dogs learn best by consistent repetition. Every day builds on the day before and reinforces the lesson in your dog's mind. Practice sit for greetings, wait for food or before he/she goes through a doorway, or out of your car, lie down on your mat while we are eating. On your walks and during play sessions, ask your dog to sit, down, wait, stay, come, etc.

Try to turn training into fun games so that your dog enjoys training. If your dog thinks it's a fun game, you are going to have a willing partner. Here's an example. You take your dog to the dog park where your dog loves to go. You ask for a sit to get into the gate, you take the 2 second sit and open the gate, and say "go play". Wait 3-5 minutes so your dog can get acquainted to the dogs that are there. Then call your dog, "Fido, Come". Make it a happy call, have your treats ready, when your dog comes, reward with treats and praise, then release your dog, "Ok, go play" Repeat many, many times. Make your dog think this is the most fun game ever! Remember, rewards are anything your dog finds as fun and rewarding, this usually is treats, happy talk, petting on the chest or shoulder, NOT A PAT on the head. Try patting your own head, it's not that pleasant.

It is unrealistic to expect your dog to respond to your cues in environments outside of your home unless you practice in all environments. Dogs don't generalize easily. They do NOT know better because "they do it all the time at home". Each new environment makes things completely different for them, keep that in mind and be patient, lower the criteria, and train your dog in the new place just like you did in your house. Eventually they will get the new behavior and be able to do it in different situations.

Positive Reward Training

A reward is anything your dog likes, anything..... like balls, toys, happy talk, petting, food. So if you reward the behaviors you like, you will get more of them, this is proven science and the way you can train any animal. The key is to find things that are truly rewarding to your dog, not what "you think" your dog should like.

What positive reward training is not ... it's not permissive. So it's important to interrupt, in a kind way anything that your dog is doing that is inappropriate.



Using food in dog training

Why do I have to use food to train my dog, Shouldn't the dog just do what I ask?

Dogs are intelligent, thinking, feeling beings. They want to do things that are fun and rewarding just like us humans. Think about it, you do things that are either self-rewarding or someone else is rewarding, like working for a pay check or cooking dinner for your family because you feel satisfied by doing so. Sure you can force your dog to do things, you are bigger and a human, but how will it feel for you, how will it feel for the dog. I guarantee there will be mistrust and fear instilled if you are harsh with your dog. If the dog is motivated to learn, it's just more fun for both of you.

My dog will only listen to me if I have food.

Remember dogs are very intelligent, so sometimes they learn things that we don't want them to learn, like knowing if you have food on you or not. How can we get around this problem? Rewards must be **intermittent** once the behavior is learned. This means rewarding randomly, I like to choose the best of the behavior, like a come when called that is fast and immediate. Don't reach for the treat until the behavior is completed. Treats need to be hidden until it's time to reward the behavior.

Bribes versus Rewards

The treats are a reward, they are not a bribe. So it's not "Fido, Chicken" while you wave the chicken jerky. It is: Fido, COME (or any word you use), when your dog is at your feet, you deliver several yummy treats. A bribe comes before a behavior; a reward comes after the behavior.

Will my dog get fat with all those treats?

Whatever you put into your dog during training, reduce from his meals. It's just that simple. Also make sure you are using treats that your dogs can digest. Too much cheese or hot dogs will make any of us sick.

Tiny Treats

Dogs will work for a speck of food, especially if it's nice and smelly. So cut up the treats really small. The size of a pea for a large dog, 1/4 size for small dogs.

My Dog has no interest in food.

Positive reinforcement training isn't all about food; it's about whatever your dog likes enough to want to earn it. Food is just the easiest method. There are other ways, balls for ball dogs or tug on a rope. Sometimes these games must be taught to the dog first. Some dogs lose their interest in food because they have only been feed kibble, so it's important to keep trying with food, especially very high value food, like cheese, or lunch meat.

How do I stop using food to train?

When you are comfortable that your dog will perform the behavior anywhere, under any circumstances, then you do not need to use food to train that behavior any longer. That would mean 100% reliability and bottom line none of us are every 100% reliable. I say never stop using food to train. If you have a few treats on you whenever you are out and about you can reward great behaviors and also prevent problems.



My dog is trained in my house and he knows it, but when I take him to the park, I have to bribe him.

You don't take a beginner tennis lesson and then expect to play in Wimbledon the next week, right? Learning comes in steps, your house is the first step, in every room of your house should be step 2, and in your back yard should be step 3. Step 4 is in the front yard. Step 5 might be in the neighbor's yard. And so on, baby steps. The park with lots going on is Wimbledon, so remember to gradually work on it every day and you'll get there.

In conclusion, there is never a real end to training our dogs how to live with us is there? We humans are learning all the time; it's what keeps life interesting. This applies to your dog also, they are always learning and needing stimulation. Always remind yourself, our dogs are emotional, intelligent beings that require daily interaction, variety, exercise, love and attention. Of course that list could go on, but these are key components of a well-balanced dog.

I hope you find great adventure with your dog(s) and have a happy life together. Thanks for reading.

*Juliet Whitfield, CPDT
Dog Adventure Architect
Take Your Dog Along.com*

