A GUIDE TO HOW DOGS LEARN

Using these principles, you can train a dog to do just about anything! If you have difficulty in training, or it seems the dog is confused, ask yourself if you have fully considered the following factors.

HOW DO DOGS LEARN?

TIMING

A dog has a period of 1.3 seconds in which to associate a cause with an effect. This means that the old adage, "you have to catch them in the act" is absolutely true. To reward a dog for a sit five seconds after they've sat and gotten up again is meaningless to a dog. A dog believes they are being praised or corrected for whatever they are doing *at the moment*. Dogs live in the present. You must watch closely enough that you see mistakes or successes exactly when they occur and can provide consequences instantly. Waiting longer than 1.3 seconds may create confusion in the dog due to the time lag in communication.

CONSISTENCY

There is no gray area for dogs. *Your training must be very clear.* A rule is a rule. For example, if you do not want your dog to jump up on you, you must consistently reinforce the principle. Say I happen to have gotten a promotion at work and I am in a great mood. I come home and let Fido jump on me because I am so happy. I scratch his head and tell him he's a good boy. The next day let's pretend that work was terrible and I am now in a bad mood. I walk in my door, Fido jumps on me. I am in a terrible mood so I get angry with him for jumping up. Now poor Fido is confused about the issue of jumping up. You must be clear in your training. You must be 100% consistent. This will result in a dog that feels safe and trusting within very well defined rules.

MOTIVATION

Without motivation, there is no behavior. Think of it this way, reinforcement makes a behavior more likely and punishment makes it less likely. You communicate to your dog while training (and at all other times as well) with praise and rewards when they are doing well. As a result, the behaviors you reward will occur more often. Both praise and correction must be motivational to the dog. You want your communication to be meaningful. That means that your praise or rewards must be meaningful enough for your dog to strive for in the future. For example, if a dog does not like to be touched and you reward for doing something correctly is petting, that is not necessarily positive for that dog. Make sure to use a reinforcement your dog responds to. Your corrections need only be enough to decrease or extinguish a behavior that is undesirable. *Catching and reinforcing Fido doing the correct behavior is the most effective way to train.*

ASSOCIATION

Dogs learn by association. When one thing happens, another is likely to follow. This is why timing, consistency and motivation are so important. If any of those principles is off, either you or the dog (or both) can become frustrated and confused. Think about Pavlov's dogs. After repeatedly presenting food after ringing a bell, the dogs learned that the bell meant food would soon follow. Likewise, if a behavior is always followed by a consequence, the dog has learned an association between their behavior and a positive or negative consequence. This also means that dogs don't generalize well. For example, a dog learns how to sit in their training class, but it clueless when you ask for a sit in the kitchen. Practicing in many different places with different people and different situations will help the dog form solid associations.

As you train, think of these factors. If the dog is not responding to training, or acts confused, ask yourself whether you are being clear with the dog. Is your timing correct? Is your training motivational? Are you being consistent? If your answer is not yes to all of these questions, you cannot expect miracles from Fido. And don't forget to practice every day!

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