
Communicating With a Dog

Most dogs like their humans. If only owners could explain how they would like their dog to behave, and what's in it for the dog, most likely the dog would comply with the wishes of its human. However, since people and dogs communicate with different languages, dogs cannot be expected to automatically understand what their owners are trying to say. Consequently, either people must communicate to the dog using dog language, or owners should teach dogs a few words from the human language. Most people opt for the latter.

The principles of communicating with a dog are extremely simple. Teach the dog a physical behavior. Reward the dog when s/he offers the behavior, then attach a word to the behavior, and, if the dog really understands the behavior (does it 99 times out of a hundred) then remove or withhold a reward if s/he will not offer the behavior when you ask for it.

If this is so simple, then why do so many dog owners have so much trouble trying to put theory to practice? Because many people have unrealistic expectations, and believe that their dog should be able to learn in an instant. Some people also try to punish a dog into submission which invariably does more harm than good.

Rewards

An important aspect of training is rewarding the dog for appropriate and acceptable behavior. However far too few people adhere to this basic principle. Too many owners take a dog's good behavior for granted and ignore the dog while it is well behaved. Instead, they restrict 'training' to punishing the dog for making 'mistakes'. A classic example is barking. Many owners occasionally and randomly punish the dog at times when it is barking but very

few owners will praise the dog when it is quiet. Similarly, whereas many people readily punish the dog when it jumps up on visitors, few reward the dog when it greets people appropriately. If the dog sits and greets people in silence, it is often ignored altogether. Consequence without knowledge is not productive training.

First show the dog how to behave. Good behavior should not go unnoticed or un-reinforced. If the dog has been asked to stop misbehaving, owners should continue to pay attention to the dog so they can reward it as soon as it stops jumping or barking.

Many humans are extremely affectionate towards their animals. Unfortunately, a lot of this affection is given at the wrong time and ultimately does more harm than good. Many dogs receive tons of praise and affection just for greeting their owner at the door, or for lazily laying their head on their owner's lap. No one would want owners to withhold affection from their pets. An occasional Spontaneous show of affection from either party is one of the most enjoyable and valuable aspects of sharing life with a dog. On the other hand, repeated large doses of free affection will certainly reduce its effectiveness as a reward. Instead, the dog will become 'spoiled'. If a dog can get all the affection that it needs for just breathing, why on earth should it "sit" for a small amount of praise? Rather than limiting affection to occasional, random displays dictated by the whim of the owner, it would be better to increase the amount of attention and affection, spread it throughout the day and make it contingent upon the dog's good behavior. The dog should be rewarded for behaving appropriately on its own initiative. Good behavior should never be taken for granted.

Variety of rewards

Far too many owners rely on one type of reward, such as food treats or praise. As a result, many dogs become chow-hounds or affection mongers. The dogs develop Jekyll and Hyde personalities: they act like perfect angels if they know that the owner has a food treat or is in a good frame of mind, but often fail to obey at all if the owner has no food in their pocket or love in their heart. By all means the owner should use food rewards and praise in training, especially in the early teaching stages. However, the owners should use a variety of rewards during maintenance training. Once the dog has been taught the meaning of a few basic obedience commands, to ensure reliability, maintenance training must be

effectively integrated into daily living. The owner should make a list of the dog's most enjoyable activities, for example:

1. Playing with other dogs
2. Playing with owner, e.g., fetch ball, catch frisbee
3. Walks
4. Dinner time
5. Sitting on owner's lap
6. Food treats
7. Riding in car, etc.

The list would be unique for each dog. The dog should be asked to say "please" before being allowed to indulge in any of these activities. The dog may say "please" by sitting, lying down, or performing some other simple obedience exercise. For example, before being allowed to jump into the owner's lap, the dog has to "sit" first. The dog has to "come, sit" and "down-stay" before getting its dinner. If the dog is requested to perform quick and simple obedience commands before all enjoyable activities, within no time at all, the dog will obey its owner willingly.

Reprimands

Unfortunately, few people know how to correctly and effectively reprimand an animal and instead, they subject the poor dog to all sorts of exceedingly harmful mental and physical abuse. First of all, hitting dogs is ill-advised and unnecessary. Hitting a dog is an ineffective punishment that often excites the dog, making it more likely to misbehave further. Furthermore, if the dog has not been well socialized, the dog may become "hand shy" or defensive and may resort to biting. It is safest to avoid reprimands altogether.

Warnings

Before even considering reprimanding a dog, the owners should make sure that the dog understands what the correct behavior is. The dog must be taught that good behavior results in gain and that bad behavior results in loss. The dog should be praised as soon as it discontinues misbehaving and then be shown what it is expected to do. However, with correct timing, the dog will learn extremely quickly. For example, when the owner says "shush", if the dog is immediately rewarded for quiet then the warning "shush" will take on a clearer meaning, as it would if the dog chose not to be quiet for "shush" and as a result lost a reward that she/he might have earned. Desirable results are not achieved if the dog is punished upon the owners return for something that it may have done hours beforehand. Instead the dog associates the punishment with the owner's return home. In effect the dog is punished for greeting its owner. If the owner further delays the punishment while looking for a rolled up newspaper and the dog runs for cover, the dog is now punished for letting the owner catch it.

A dog does not understand the meaning of delayed punishments. If more than 2 seconds have passed the dog cannot connect the punishment with the event. Instead, the dog learns that there are certain times when it should not let its human "best friend" get too close. In addition, it may learn how to predict those times whenever the owner's heart rate skyrockets or the voice begins to exceed 80 decibels. Dogs often receive delayed and inappropriate reprimands because the owner tends to bear a grudge. It is useless to harp on the dog long after the event has taken place. Consequently, the dog never learns that ceasing to misbehave was what the owner wanted. The punishment should cease the moment the dog stops misbehaving. Unfortunately, the bad side of human nature seems to prevent this. The dog may be hiding under the table with its tail between its legs, or it may grovel towards its owner, only to be greeted with: "you bad, bad dog". Now the owner is training the dog not to lie under the table and not to approach to make up.