

Training – Applying the theory

We train puppies not just so they sit and lie down on command, but for 'life companionship' training. Sitting when told but bouncing around like a lunatic the other 98% of the time doesn't make for a good companion.

Training puppy how to behave in public, in your house, in the car, how to greet other dogs, how to meet new people. Basically training him how to be a pleasure to have around, as the more pleasure you gain from him, the more you enjoy his company, then the more time you will spend with him, and the happier he will be. It is unfair on puppy to have him locked in the backyard on his own 23 hrs a day, dogs are social creatures that need stimulation and company. Having your dog emotionally happy and healthy is our aim.

Training doesn't take long. A few minutes 4 – 5 times per day is adequate. It is more effective in short bursts than long sessions, and easier for you to find shorter amounts of time.

Dogs will learn whether we are actively teaching them or not, so be careful how you respond. If your puppy is crying at the door and you let him in while he is crying, then he will learn that if he cries you respond.

Dogs are amoral. They have no right or wrong distinction, they understand reward and no reward, safe and dangerous. Success and no success.

Successful in dog terms means the behaviour was rewarded.

Raiding the garbage can is successful because of all the smelly yummy treats down the bottom, and what fun ripping all those bits of paper up was. Raiding the garbage can while you are watching is not safe, you don't like to see him do it, but it was fun before, it was safe before but now it isn't – conclusion, the difference between before and now is YOU. So, safe while you are not there.

The distinction will not be to not do it at all, but to do it while it is safe, when you are not there.

Watching people while they eat is successful, as often puppy has been fed treats. Watching the fridge is not successful, even though puppy knows full well where the food comes from.

Urinating on the carpet when puppy was alone was rewarded by bladder relief, when you were watching it was un-safe, as you were angry, the carpet is the same, the bladder relief is the same, the difference again is YOU, conclusion, don't urinate in front of people they don't like to see you wee, go and hide so they can't see you go.

Take advantage of unasked for behaviours, if puppy is lying quietly, reward him. Rewarded behaviours are more likely to happen again. He will learn whether we are teaching him or not, so reward what you like to see.

Let the reward fit the deed, if puppy has done something really difficult to do, like stop playing and lay down when asked, lots of rewards.

Puppies learn faster when the reward level is higher. More reward = more feedback, so he will get the message that the response was right faster.

The lures we use in training approximate the eventual hand signal for a cue. For example the down signal is a hand in a downward motion toward the ground, the lure is the piece of food in front of puppy's nose toward the ground.

We aim to fade the lures as soon as puppy understands the position we are asking for, once he starts to lie down as our hand starts down, we can then do the signal minus the food, so the food becomes a reward instead of a lure. We can also start to use the verbal cue then, just before the hand signal, after a few repetitions puppy relates 'down' (verbal) with the hand signal that will immediately follow, so starts to down just on the verbal.

Doing temperament training, for example acclimatising to children, men, loud noises, scary things, other dogs etc, you can never use too much food. In obedience work the aim is to drop the food as soon as we can. You don't always have to carry food in order for your puppy to obey. As dogs get older other things may become more fun, so to prepare for when sitting for a food treat on command is not as much fun as sniffing what that last dog just said, or playing tag with that other puppy over there, we switch to 'LIFE REWARDS', which equates to sit when asked, and the reward becomes 'go play' or 'go sniff'.

Dogs also learn lots of things that we don't realise we are actually teaching them. If you always squat down or bend your knees for example when teaching or asking your puppy for 'down', then the cue puppy may inadvertently pick up may be the body position change, and not the hand signal we thought we had taught. *One day if you don't bend your knees he may not lie down, and we can think he is being disobedient, where-as he has just learnt a different cue to the cue we thought we taught, and in this instance we just haven't given the cue he learnt.*

Because of this we need to be careful with our body signals. We also need to practise all the commands once they are established, with us in a variety of positions. With us sitting, when we are not looking at him, on verbal cue only, on hand signal only, in any number of ways that may arise in the future. And to puppies each new way of asking is a new behaviour. If he sits while you are standing looking at him, he WON'T automatically translate this 'sit' to sit while you are sitting with your back to him. This will need to be RE-TAUGHT. Once you start re-teaching in lots of different areas and body positions, he will start to generalise.

This is called 'proofing'. Each time we start a new exercise or new position, it becomes a new exercise for puppy, so we need to lower our expectations and increase our rewards, each 'proofing' though will get faster and faster than before.

Context and generalising

As you can see from the above 'proofing' example, dogs don't generalise well. Just because your puppy sits when you ask in your back yard, doesn't mean that he will know sit in the park. The more places you can teach sit the more reliable he will become. Make it easy on both of you though, and increase the distractions slowly. Don't ask too much too soon. Start in the back yard, then the front, then the park alone, then with other dogs around. Having each bit reliable before doing the next will make it easier. The more you do the easier it will become. With each change again lower the criteria and increase the reward.

We can also use this non-generalising to our advantage though. Furniture for example. If your daughter lets puppy lie on her bed, he won't automatically assume that every bed in the house is okay to lie on too. As long as the first few attempts at no go pieces are given suitable feedback, example, 'sorry puppy wrong choice', and gesturing to (and rewarding for) lying on the floor instead, BEFORE he has landed on the no go item, he will learn that some items are okay to lie on, others are not. He will find it hard though to make the distinction that today I am allowed and tomorrow I am not, eg if he is wet.

You must do this before he has made the wrong choice though, as otherwise the safe nonsafe discrimination will come into play, safe when you are not there, not safe when you are. And AFTER he has got on the wrong lounge, you may just end up teaching him how to get off, not how to stay off in the first place. He has after all been rewarded by the comfort, and the only difference now is YOU.

Same goes for tug toys and washing on the line. (Some dog trainers will tell you not to do this, you can make up your own mind. I have personally used it for a number of dogs all successfully, and will do again.)

Hang a tug toy at his height near the washing line. You MUST play with him with this often and make it fun. When you hang the washing the first few times again you MUST be there to give feed back. If he looks at the washing, say 'sorry puppy wrong choice' and actively encourage him to play with HIS tug toy. His tug toy must be 100% MORE FUN than the washing by your active encouragement and rewards for playing with it. Once this is the case he shouldn't even look at the washing, except maybe to say 'boring, I want my tug toy instead'.

Same goes for shoes and articles left lying around. If each time he looks at an inappropriate article you say 'here play with this instead', and actively encourage him and play with him with his toys, his toys then become so much more meaningful he shouldn't look to inappropriate things, but should actively seek his toys instead.

You will be not only playing with him, but actually training him to LIKE his toys in preference to yours, and instilling in him a habit of playing with those toys that are acceptable to you.

Learning experiences

During training there are a couple of quantum leaps or learning experiences that we want your dog to have. (And a couple we want you to make too).

Food Vs no food

The first thing we want puppy to catch onto is that the food lure actually means something. We want him to realise we are asking something, so he offers us a response. We want him to learn that the correct response earns him the reward.

We then want for him to see the food, but to not always receive it, in other words not to expect that it will always be forthcoming, in view or not.

The next major learning leap your pup needs to make is that even though he can't see the food, there is still a good chance that it will be presented after his correct response. You must have him think that you can magically conjure up the food out of nowhere.

You do this by having the treats either in your pocket out of sight, or ready on a counter or somewhere he can't see but accessible. Ask him to sit using verbal and hand signal, if he does immediately use your voice telling him good boy while you are retrieving the food from its hiding place, (your voice bridges the gap between his response and the food arrival, so he will know what the treat was for) If he doesn't sit, repeat your request until he does, then praise until food arrival.

The aim is to have puppy work for you whether you have food or not.
IF YOU KEEP THE FOOD IN YOUR HAND TOO LONG, THE FOOD WILL BECOME PART OF THE CUE.

So what happens is when puppy can't see food in your hand, the cue is different and you won't get the behaviour, in other words your puppy will not do what you ask unless he can see the food. **NOT WHAT WE WANT.**

A one request one food reward scenario is predictable for puppy and hence boring. Sometimes the prospect of one food reward is just not as good as sniffing the ground over there, or playing with that other puppy.

Which brings us to the next step. Phasing out the food rewards and substituting them for LIFE REWARDS. Walks, balls, games, toys. When puppy understands the requests we make, the reward should be a gamble, puppy will never know whether he earns a treat, a tug game, or a walk in the park. Exciting.

Then when puppy is at the adolescent stage when sniffing the ground is more fun than sitting for a treat, then 'sit' and the reward is go sniff. Recall and the reward is go play.

Relevance training

Once puppy understands your requests, then we need him to also understand the relevance of your request. Firstly that correct responses benefit him. Secondly that when you request, you mean it. Now, not when he feels like it. Apart from being annoying if you have to ask him to sit four times, one day it may save his life if he sits first time, (he could be heading toward the road.)

We need you to urge, compel, insist (with no physical force), so puppy realises that he may as well do it now, as you mean it and he has to do it anyway. Then huge reward for a tough ask and end session and game.

If you ask puppy to sit and the phone rings and you get that first, next time you ask for sit he's likely to think, 'well I don't always have to do what I'm asked, and what I'm doing now is rather fun,' and then YOU have a problem starting.

Whereas if you ask puppy to sit and you keep asking and urging until he does, (once he does actually know sit this is), then next time his response will be faster, and faster and faster. Especially if he gets better rewards for the fastest sits.

Cues or commands

Puppy can learn as many different commands as you wish to teach him.

Have a think about the words you are using though, and decide on some terms before you progress too far. For example if you say down when you ask him to lie down, then you should say off to prevent jumping on objects.

Stay shouldn't be used to get you inside the back door without him, as stay should mean stay until you are asked otherwise (remember your release command), what you could use instead is wait, similar but can be taught to mean wait a little while, then do what you like, or 'wait outside' perhaps, meaning as it sounds.

Good idea to have some different level recall commands too. 'Come' meaning come to me immediately and sit until told otherwise. 'Here' to mean come within ten feet and pay attention in case you add another command. And 'Come along' meaning just stick within range or a bit closer keeping half an eye on me.

All of these things puppy won't know without being taught, but having some different level commands means when you don't need him to be perfect, just careful, you won't blow your 'perfect' commands by him breaking them. Your keep half an eye on me or keep close but still be a dog commands can suffice.

Untraining

There are a number of ways to get rid of unwanted behaviours. They don't all work for all behaviours, and some work better than others in certain situations.

- **Shoot the dog**
Doesn't always mean literally! Example dog rips washing off the clothes line, Chain the dog out of reach when the washing is out
- **Punishment**
Generally doesn't work at preventing bad behaviours, as it usually happens AFTER the behaviour has occurred, so therefore CAN'T prevent it. Learning to alter behaviour in the future to avoid punishment in the future for a crime puppy committed yesterday is just purely outside the realm of understanding for any animal.
- **Negative reinforcement**
Any unpleasant stimulus that can be turned off by changing ones behaviour. This can sometimes work, eg horses learn to not lean on the fence to avoid the shock. The difference between this and punishment is that negative reinforcement occurs during the offence, AND stopping the behaviour stops the pain or negative stimulus. There are better ways though.
- **Extinction**
Behaviours that don't produce results usually will extinguish, or go away on their own. Ignore puppy crying at the door and he should wander off to amuse himself elsewhere.
- **Train an incompatible behaviour**
Puppy jumps all over visitors – teach puppy to sit. He can't do both at the same time.
- **Put the behaviour on cue**
Once a behaviour has been brought under stimulus control, it tends to extinguish in the absence of the cue. As well as learning what the cue is, the animal also learns that it is rewarded for doing the behaviour only in response to the cue, so in the absence of the cue, usually no behaviour.
- **Shape the absence**
Basically means rewarding ANY behaviour that is not the undesired behaviour
- **Change the motivation**
Train the animal to want to do something else instead. Dog wants to sleep on the furniture, make his dog bed much more rewarding, so he wants to lie there instead.