

How Dogs Learn

How dogs think

It's helpful to understand how dogs think so that we can understand the best way to interact and train them! Dogs are opportunistic creatures and can be quite self-centred. They are amoral, which means they learn what is safe and unsafe, not what is right and wrong. Dogs are social throughout their entire lives. They are chewing explorers who are always learning from their actions.

How dogs learn

Dogs learn through cause and effect. If a behaviour they perform attains a desired outcome for them, they will repeat it. They don't understand right from wrong and do nothing out of spite; that motivation is unique to humans. Our dogs don't do anything with the intent to harm or upset us. They simply do what they are naturally driven to do.



Like us, our dogs want to be happy and comfortable; resources such as food, comfort and attention make them happy. Getting and keeping these resources is a survival instinct. Dogs do understand that something can be fun or scary, safe or unsafe.

It's important to know that a reward will strengthen a behaviour. If jumping up means our dogs get the desired attention, they will continue to jump up. If they get food off the counter, they will continue to look for the opportunity to reward themselves by jumping on the counter.

If you're attempting to stop a behaviour or asking your dog to do something else, you're giving them attention. If an unwanted behaviour continues or increases, it means that behaviour is being rewarded somehow. Attention is one of the most valuable rewards you can give your dog. One of the best ways to solve behaviour problems is controlling the resources and environment to ensure dogs receive no reward for their unwanted behaviour and instead learn that earning their resources is the best way!

Management and prevention training

Early training is essential to the prevention of unwanted behaviours. Dogs naturally bark, chew, jump, demand attention, guard valued resources and more! If we want our dogs to behave according to what we find polite, we need to teach them what behaviours we want to see. Behaviour "problems" are usually normal dog behaviours that we as people don't see as appropriate and we want our dogs to behave differently. The success of an appropriate behaviour and a good human-canine bond depends on us teaching puppies the rules and regulations of domestic living.

Management and training are the best ways to combat problems before they arise. The most critical time in a dog's life is puppyhood! An adult dog's temperament and behaviour habits (both



good and bad) are shaped during puppyhood. Instead of being reactive, we want to be proactive and set our puppies up for success.

Punishments are often used when a dog is participating in normal dog behaviours. Physical and/or verbal abuse, as well as isolation, can be detrimental to the human-animal bond and the trust you share. Dogs don't know what we want and don't want unless we teach them to understand. Many will blame a dog's "misbehaviour" on "dominance" and believe that punishing, instilling fear, or correcting will stop the unwanted behaviour, but this is far from the truth. Instead, all we stand to do is stifle a dog's natural communication and it is counterproductive to the learning process. A dog loses the ability to think, learn, problem solve and make good choices as a result. Punishment causes fear, anxiety and stress, which can possibly lead to aggression.

Resource control and rewards

Training becomes a lot easier when you make a point to include it in daily life. Teach your dog to understand resources should be earned. A resource is anything your dog finds rewarding or valuable, be that food, treats, toys, off leash play, their spot on the couch or cuddling etc. Make sure your dog has to earn whatever they value by performing a cue you have previously taught.

Ignore all demands for attention, walks, food, play, etc. Remember touching or talking to your dog when they're demanding is giving them attention! Give your dog all the love, attention, and fun you want but only when you initiate (with the exception of your dog needing to relieve themselves).

If your dog has to earn everything they value, they will recognize you as a leader. Your dog will soon be offering behaviours and responding to cues without the use of force, intimidation or fear.

Training tools

Treats

Treats are merely a tool to help your dog respond reliably to a cue. If you practice cues wherever you go, your dog will soon begin to generalize them and learn to respond no matter where you are or what the distraction. You should start by asking for simple behaviours like "sit" in a low-excitement environment, then slowly begin to increase the level of difficulty by adding distractions. Treats are not a bribe; they should be used as motivation, and reward, for creating, fine tuning and luring behaviours.

Leashes, collars and harnesses

All you need when you bring home a new puppy is a well-fitting flat buckle or martingale collar and a flat or round braided 6' leash. Harnesses can be used as well, but keep in mind most harnesses promote pulling. Many harnesses that are designed to attach to the leash at your dog's back or shoulders distribute the "weight" and make it easier and more comfortable for the dog to put pressure on their handler. Think of dog sledding. If you opt for a harness, choose a "no-pull" harness like the Freedom harness, Easy Walk harness, J-walk harness, Positively no pull harness, or other similar front or side clip harnesses.

Clicker or verbal marker

A clicker or a verbal marker (e.g. "yes!") is a way to communicate with your puppy using positive reinforcement. It is used to teach or improve behaviours while your pup is learning. The clicker is a handheld acoustic device that is paired with the presentation of a treat. The click marks the behaviour; click = treat, no click = try again! A conditioned verbal word acts the same way as a clicker; "yes!" = treat, silence = try again!



