



SET YOUR PET UP FOR TRAINING SUCCESS

BY LISA DESATNIK

“I have the most stubborn dog,” Brenda told me. “He just won’t listen when he doesn’t want to. I don’t think he can be trained.”

I can’t tell you how many times I have heard that from people like Brenda who share their homes with dogs (or birds or cats for that matter). She took her pet to obedience class. Fido comes when she calls him in the kitchen to give him a treat. He even sits quickly upon request. However, if he is outside sniffing the flowers and she needs him to come so that she can leave for an appointment, he completely ignores her.

What happens next? Well, she may end up chasing him until she catches him and pulls him inside. She may continue to call with heightened urgency until he finally comes, gets punished when he arrives at her side, and then is brought inside to be by himself when his favorite person leaves.

From Brenda’s perspective, Fido is just plain bull headed. From Fido’s perspec-

tive, there are a number of reasons why he chooses to do anything but come to her. Top of his list is that he cannot reliably predict that coming to Brenda will be more fun or exciting (have a higher value consequence) than his choosing not to come. If he comes, it often means an end to the fun and sometimes a scolding; however, by NOT coming, it may result in a great game of chase, or being able to continue sniffing the flowers, or chasing a squirrel or simply avoiding a scolding. Sound familiar?

Unfortunately, when Brenda continues to call her dog at a time when her dog won’t come, she is setting both herself and her dog up for failure. The “come” cue becomes so weak that it begins to take on the meaning, ‘keep playing, go sniff the flowers and only return to Brenda when

there isn't anything more fun (reinforcing) to do.'

What's a dog owner supposed to do?

Let's re-evaluate the training plan. Are punishment or dominance strategies currently used to manage behavior? Anxiety, escape, aggression and apathy are just some of the many negative side effects; in fact, the person doing the punishing will become associated with the punishment. Worse yet, if the punishment doesn't occur at the exact moment of the behavior you want to stop, such as ignoring the 'come' cue, your dog will think he is being punished for running to you instead of being punished for continuing to sniff the flowers. You want to train in a way that creates a love for learning, an enhanced quality of life for the animal and a strengthened relationship between pet and caregiver.

First things first

An important first step you can take to set yourself, your pet and your relationship up for success is to shift your mind-set. Rather than focusing on fixing or correcting unwanted behavior, focus on what behavior you want your dog to do. Rather than seeing yourself as the pack leader or alpha dog, envision yourself as a collaborator with your dog. If your dog just isn't getting what you are trying to teach, take that as feedback that he doesn't understand the lesson plan and that you need to change your teaching strategy. Maybe you need to break it down into smaller steps, be in a less distractive environment or offer higher value reinforcements. Rather than thinking about your dog as bad or dominant for doing what you disapprove of, realize that all behavior continues or strengthens because it is being reinforced by something...or someone.

Oftentimes pet caregivers reinforce unwanted behaviors without even realizing it. When the doorbell rings and our dog barks, we open the door to let in friends. Our dog will bark more at the doorbell to get fun people to walk through it. When our dog pulls on his leash and we continue to walk in his direction, our dog will pull more to get us to walk forward. When we

sit on the couch watching TV and our dog lies on the floor (a behavior we like), he gets ignored; but if he bumps us in the leg or barks, he more than likely will get us to notice. Guess which behavior he will choose to do more of in the future if he wants our attention?

Setting your pet up for success

Here's the beauty of positive reinforcement: You are never taking away the power of choice from your dog. You are simply rearranging the environment so that the unwanted behavior is never set in motion and/or making the choice you want him to make is over-the-top more valuable than the unwanted choice by manipulating the consequences of the behavior; and you are teaching that skill in an environment where he can concentrate on learning (with minimal distractions in the beginning).

If you know your dog will bump you while you watch TV, then one solution could be redirecting his attention by giving him a foraging toy (e.g., treat-release toys) or play games that involve his expending a lot of energy prior to your TV time so that resting becomes his choice. Another solution could be teaching him an alternative behavior like lying down on a plushy mat and getting it reliably on cue. Then, teach him to hold that behavior for longer durations before delivering reinforcement. Now, you can begin to practice while you watch TV. During commercial breaks, release your dog from his mat for a short play session, then cue him to return to his mat when the show starts again. Those play sessions can be an important part of your training plan.

The behavioral training method I describe here is based on the Premack Principle, which states that the performance of a high probability behavior can be used to reinforce the performance of a low probability behavior. The more you pair the two, the more you strengthen passion for the low probability behavior. Simply stated, the emotional pairing of playing tug, smelling flowers, or walking out the door becomes associated with sitting or lying on a mat. It is one of the most powerful

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training tools you have at your disposal.

You can ask your dog to drop a toy, and then reinforce that behavior by giving a higher value toy back. When your dog is sniffing flowers, ask him to come, and then reinforce the behavior of coming by sending him right back to the flowers as soon as he gets to you. You can teach your dog that *if* food falls to the floor and he lunges for it, the opportunity to eat that food is gone; but *if* he sits when food falls to the floor, then he is given that tasty treat. The uses of the Premack Principle are endless, and they make learning so much fun!

FUN. What a great concept! Here is my challenge for you. Instead of saying your dog is obstinate and just won't listen, hold yourself up to finding his brilliance by giving him a reason to love learning.

In addition to her communication work, Lisa Desatnik is a pet trainer who uses positive reinforcement strategies. See her presentation, "My Dog's Hero," at Petopolis. Learn more about her training at SoMuchPETential.com.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

There are so many fun, creative ways for teaching your dog to come reliably. To begin with:

- Make a list of your dog's favorite treats, toys and activities and offer them to your dog as a behavior strengthener (reinforcer) for coming.
- To set yourselves up for success, only call your dog when you know that you can reliably predict he will come.
- If needed, make coming to you more valuable by running in the opposite direction, being excited and having a "party." Still, only offer the cue ONCE.
- Keep your recall cue sacred and ONLY use it when you can offer your dog a high-value reason for coming.
- Practice the collar grab game regularly to teach your dog to associate positive things with touching his collar. You never know when an emergency may occur that would cause you to have to hold onto it. (If your dog won't allow you to touch his collar, first teach him to associate collar grabs with good things through shaping.**)
- Only move forward with these steps when your dog can reliably continue to focus; SLOWLY add in difficulty with distance and distractions. —LD

*** Shaping is behavior-science strategy for teaching behaviors by breaking that final 'target' behavior down into smaller increments known as successive approximations and reinforcing the animal at each incremental step until the final target behavior is learned.*

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