

Canine Psychology – Dog Training Tips

Introduction

One of my colleagues brings her dog, Dot, into work rather than leaving her at home alone. When she wants to nip out to the shops at lunchtime I look after Dot. One day when my colleague was out Dot started to wander around, and I gave her the cue to ‘go to bed’ as I wanted to keep an eye on her. Her response was not very prompt and it took her a while to settle down. Another colleague witnessed this and said he had heard that it’s important ‘to never let a dog get the better of you’. An interesting comment, I thought, but not an uncommon one. I do wonder why people think this – do they fear their dog is plotting to take over their household?!

Anyway, there was a simple explanation for Dot’s lack of prompt response to my cue, which I discovered by observing how she acted with her owner. Whenever her owner gave a command she clicked her fingers and, hey presto, Dot did exactly as requested. Next time I was minding Dot and I needed her to stay put, I gave the cue and clicked my fingers and Dot responded superbly! I praised her warmly and carried on with my work, now wiser about how best to look after Dot.

The reason I mention this story is that it demonstrates that when we train dogs, we are programming them to respond in a certain way to a specific cue or command. If a dog gets something nice for doing what we ask, then he sees it as a positive factor and is highly likely to repeat it. This is the idea behind reward-based training, which works very well.

Be your dog’s best friend

The basis for successful training is a good relationship with your dog. You’ll be off to an excellent start if:

- 🐾 Your dog sees you as the provider of all things positive – food, games, fun, affection, comfort, and exercise.
- 🐾 Your dog loves to be with you.
- 🐾 You are the person that ‘makes everything good happen’.

Training is fun!

- 🐾 A happy, relaxed dog will enjoy learning, especially when it’s a time of fun.
- 🐾 Your dog will enjoy spending time with you – their favourite person.
- 🐾 Training is mentally stimulating and prevents boredom.
- 🐾 Reward-based training creates an enthusiastic pupil, so make sure your dog knows what’s in it for him!



Have a plan

- 🐾 Have a list of the various things you want to teach your dog, find out how each can be achieved, and then take them one at a time.
- 🐾 It works best to teach one thing thoroughly before moving on to something new.
- 🐾 Never try to teach your dog several new things at once as this will be confusing.
- 🐾 For more complicated tasks you may need to plan different stages, starting with the easiest first.

Rewards

- 🐾 Find out what your dog likes best as a reward – is it lots of attention, a game, playing with its ball, or tasty treats? Now exploit this!
- 🐾 When using food treats, use something very tasty such as slices of sausage, dried liver or strong cheese – something that is worth the dog working for. (If you're concerned about over-feeding, you can always cut down a little on their normal meal.)
- 🐾 Let your dog know that you have this most prized reward about your person and when he responds to a cue as you want, such as coming when called, give him the reward.
- 🐾 For more complex training, you can reward successful steps along the way.
- 🐾 When your dog has understood what is expected and is responding well, make the rewards intermittent – in quality and quantity. So sometimes just give praise, sometimes give him a small treat, and occasionally give him a really special treat. This will keep your dog's attention and enthusiasm.
- 🐾 Always praise good responses so that your dog gets lots of positive feedback.
- 🐾 Always praise and reward IMMEDIATELY, as your dog will not associate the reward with the behaviour once the moment has passed.



Let your dog earn its rewards

- 🐾 If you think about the things your dog counts as a reward, you might find you're giving out lots of good stuff for doing nothing. For example, when you put down his dinner bowl do you get him to sit first, and then tell him when to 'Go boy', at which point he pounces on it enthusiastically? If you don't do this, you're giving him huge rewards for free – so lots of missed opportunities!
- 🐾 Everything that he likes, such as food, walks and games, can be preceded by a simple command, such as 'sit', 'down' or 'give paw', and when he responds he gets his prize. That way he has earned his walk, meal or play session, and you have successfully reinforced the idea in his head that doing what you ask brings the good things in life!

The general rule in dog training

- 🐾 This is to reward wanted behaviour but to ignore unwanted behaviour. So there is no point in shouting at him to 'be quiet' when he's barking madly (and driving you crazy) as he'll think you're joining in! It's better to turn away and ignore him for a short while, and then give lots of praise when he is quiet.
- 🐾 Caution: Be aware of what you are rewarding. For example, if your dog jumps all over you when you get in and you smother him in affection, he may think this is what you want him to do, and he'll continue to jump up at you and everyone else who comes to the door. Remember, whenever you praise him, you're confirming what he is doing.

Never too old to learn

- 🐾 Dogs of any age can enjoy learning!
- 🐾 Continued learning helps to keep the brain cells active and healthy.
- 🐾 You may have to adapt games with less running around for elderly dogs. The canine nose never ages – so you can select games where your dog can sniff out treats.
- 🐾 Many dogs like to play hide-and-seek – you take their favourite toy or a treat and hide it, and then send them off to sniff it out.

Choose your training times carefully

- 🐾 Choose times for training when both you and your dog have some energy, so not straight after a meal or late at night, for instance.
- 🐾 Keep the sessions short – usually 10 to 15 minutes is long enough.

- 🐾 Have regular training sessions if possible as this keeps the interest and momentum going.
- 🐾 If your dog is stressed, don't try to do any new training as stressed dogs cannot learn effectively. Similarly if you're feeling stressed or under pressure, postpone your training session as it won't work so well. Remember, dogs can be very affected by their owners' mood.

Always try to end on a good note

If possible, end a training session on a positive note, such as after your dog has responded well and been given a reward. However, there are times when you'll realise that your dog has had enough, and you may have to finish at that point.



Finally... some further thoughts

- 🐾 Consider training your dog to do an emergency 'stop'. This could save his life in a difficult situation.
- 🐾 Fearful and frightened dogs do not learn well. If your dog is frightened of certain people or situations, don't try to force him 'to get over it'. Instead employ alternative tactics, such as keeping his attention focused on you with a treat or favourite toy. In other words, do what you can to take his mind off the problem.
- 🐾 When your dog is frightened, don't be surprised if he doesn't respond to your cue in the normal way. His lack of response is beyond his control – in other words he's too busy coping with his fear and stress.
- 🐾 A dog's main defence system is to run, and if he can't run he will stay and fight even if he doesn't want to. All dogs can and will bite if pushed to the extreme through fear or pain.

To conclude

It's worth mentioning that there is no doubt that some breeds of dogs have a greater trainability than others. German Shepherds are highly trainable and are particularly suitable for police work. You don't see the police out with a pack of Jack Russells for instance!

Soon after adopting our scruffy little cross-terrier, I was walking him in the local park when I stopped to chat with a man who had a beautiful black German Shepherd, which had been adopted by him a year or so ago. The man demonstrated to me how well-trained his dog was by clicking his fingers which prompted the dog to take a position and sit at his side, with full attention focused on her owner. I was very impressed, but walked away slightly down-hearted at the slow progress I was making with my little charge who seemed more interested in chasing squirrels, given half a chance, than learning to 'sit'. I didn't realise then that different types of dogs have such different characteristics and that little terriers have a very particular nature. However, a year after that incident my dog, Bobby, won First Prize as 'the Happiest Rescue Dog' at the local RSPCA dog show, so I reckoned I was doing something right! He has learnt lots of things and continues to do so in his old age, but he's never 'stood to attention' on command like that black German Shepherd..

**BY ANGELA GARNER, WHO HOLDS A CERTIFICATE
IN ADVANCED CANINE PSYCHOLOGY**