

## **Dog training: What we already know from parenting**

Being in the profession of caring for and training animals provides plenty of opportunity to answer questions that clients may have. One of the most frequently asked questions is “What type of training do you use?”

Let me answer that question by using the example of a parent – child relationship. I believe every parent would rather utilize positive parenting techniques to teach their child how to become a responsible, productive member of the household. We can utilize praise and kind words to reinforce the behaviors we want and expect. For example, if the child comes home from school with a test or paper that has an excellent grade we will congratulate them exuberantly to reinforce the fact that they received a good grade. We may even hang the paper on the refrigerator as a way of extending that positive reinforcement.

With older children who we are trying to teach the need to contribute to the household we may initiate a weekly allowance that they will receive for performing certain chores around the house. If, as parents, we are in the habit of buying everything the child wants when they ask for it, an allowance will provide little incentive for them to perform the required tasks. However, if the child is taught that they will have to purchase discretionary items such as CDs or Game Boy cartridges with their own money, they will quickly learn to appreciate the benefit of receiving an allowance.

Parents can decipher when a desirable habit has become second nature. We may still provide positive reinforcement to continue to encourage it, however, once learned it is an expected behavior when we ask for it. At this point if the behavior is not performed when we ask for it we know that it is not because the child does not understand what is expected in a particular situation but rather not performing the behavior out of laziness or lack of respect for our authority. In these situations negative consequences may need to be implemented if the required behavior is not exhibited when called for. Such repercussions may include a time out or taking away a privilege the child really enjoys until they begin to exhibit the proper behavior again.

This parenting example can serve as the basis for understanding the rationale behind the methods used in dog training. Like children, puppies need disciplined leadership and guidance if we expect them to turn out to be successful, productive members of the household. In the whelping box as part of a litter, the pup receives that training and guidance as well as what it needs to survive, food and social contact, from its mother and littermates. Once separated from this “pack” its human family becomes the “pack” and takes over in teaching the dog to conform to its new environment. It is imperative that a consistent message comes from all members of this new “pack” otherwise the pup will become confused.

To be successful at training it is important to understand what is important to the dog. Furthermore, as with the child who did not see value in the allowance, it is also important to make sure that the dog does not always get what it wants for free. Being aware of these

things allows us to positively reinforce the behaviors that we wish the dog to perform with a medium that will have value to the dog.

Starting off with a training regiment that is based in positive reinforcement will create a dog that is happy to be with you. Once you reach the point where the dog is constantly giving you the behavior you desire when it is called for you can start weaning it off of food rewards if that is what you have been using as reinforcement. If you have been using praise you should not have to make such a big scene anymore when the dog performs the behavior. However, you should continue to give the dog a little “good dog” praise when it performs any requested behavior.

A dog that has been trained utilizing positive reinforcement should be happy to perform the behaviors you ask of it. There are times however, when the dog may test the “pack” hierarchy and try to get away with not performing what you are certain it understands. When this happens you have to implement procedures to establish yourself as the leader. As in the example of the child this will entail consequences. These consequences ***do not*** include physically abusing the dog or hurting the dog. They should include something as simple as turning your attention away from the dog for 3 to 5 seconds, taking its toy away and ending playtime, or if absolutely necessary, an appropriately timed leash correction.

Create training opportunities out of the dog’s favorite times of the day. These are usually feeding time and when you arrive home from work or a long time away from the house. Rather than putting the food bowl down on the floor and letting the dog have his food for free, make him work for it by obeying commands. This is a good practice in general as our canine’s ancestors always had to work for their food. In addition, if utilized on a regular basis this technique will prevent the dog from learning to resource guard its food bowl.

Consistency, repetition, rules and consequences are the keys to success in dog training. Don’t let your dog down. He’s counting on you to make him all that he can be!