

INQUIRING MINDS WANT TO KNOW

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WHAT'S ON YOUR SHOPPING LIST?

If I send you to the grocery store with a shopping list of everything you should not buy, how long will it take you to shop?

Obviously, it is a lot simpler and much more efficient to carry a list of every thing you should buy when shopping. There is no reason to clutter your mind with information about products on the shelves you do not wish to purchase. I believe this same principle applies when we attempt to communicate with dogs.

For years people have spent time telling dogs what they should not do. The preverbal "NO" is used frequently as owners exclaim, "No jump, No pull, No chew, No bark, No sniff!" Some dogs probably think their name is NO! In the end, the dog's brain is filled with a long list of things he should not do. Wouldn't it be a lot more productive to praise a dog for doing the right things and ignore the mistakes? I often tell students that if yelling "NO!" worked, I would be out of business as a dog trainer!

Can a dog learn if he is not verbally chastised when he is wrong? Don't you need to "mark" the mistake? Experience has proven to me that this is not the case.

I believe that the best dog training techniques are simple, because dogs are relatively straightforward animals. As a species, canines are non verbal. They have no spoken language of their own with which to communicate. The less you say the clearer things are for the dog to comprehend.

Dogs communicate through movement. Theirs is primarily a language of body, head, ears and tail gestures accompanied by facial expressions. While it is possible to teach dogs to understand certain words in human language, they interpret movement faster and easier.

An example of this is proven repeatedly as people running agility with their dogs, signal to an obstacle and call it by the wrong name, only to have the dog perform correctly in response to the signal. In other words, for dogs, actions speak louder than words.

Understanding dogs are non verbal creatures helps explain why verbally commenting on a dog's incorrect response is not very effective or necessary. Let's examine the example of a dog learning to perform a Sit-Stay.

The untrained dog (on a buckle collar) is placed or lured into a sitting position and commanded with a verbal and/or hand signal to "Stay." The trainer immediately steps in front of the dog. Undoubtedly the untrained dog breaks the stay and gets up.

My response to this mistake is to calmly reposition the dog back into a sit and then praise the dog for returning to this position. It seems to me that if I reinstate the dog to his original sit position and tell him he is good for being there, it is intuitively obvious to any dog that he was in error.

With this approach, the dog is not prompted to think about his mistake but rather to concentrate on what he is currently doing that is correct. (It is not necessary to repeat the "Sit" or "Stay" command since it is the dog's responsibility to learn to remember what he is doing.)

There is a limit to how much information any dog can process. I prefer a dog concentrates on learning what he should be doing and not be focused on behaviors I do not want repeated.

Many of the dogs we train are extremely sensitive and do not like to be wrong. Some become so upset when verbally informed that they have made a mistake that they exhibit avoidance behavior and stress. Wandering off, sniffing, going out of their way to take agility obstacles that they "like" and what appears to be a total lack of focus is often merely a reaction to having been told that they have made a mistake.

Trainers really do not need to verbally notify a dog when it has made a mistake. This information can be imparted by withholding praise and/or rewards, repeating an exercise, standing still and showing no emotion, or by physically repositioning the dog. The training goal should be to subtly prompt the dog to figure out when something is not right and encourage him to try harder next time.

A perfect example of the "shopping list" training approach to improve performance is used routinely when teaching contacts in agility. Assume for a moment that you are trying to teach a dog to perform a "two-on-two-off" stopped contact.

Initially the dog is coaxed, lured or shaped into assuming the standing position with his hind feet on the wooden contact and his front feet on the ground surface. Once the dog has an idea of what is expected from the contact command, if he moves off of the contact before being released, he is in error.

The handler, by asking again for the contact performance or by repositioning the dog and then praising him, gets the message across, that a mistake has been made without drawing attention to the dog's incorrect behavior. The dog now has a chance to focus on the information that this spot on the equipment makes the handler happy.

Dogs will learn in spite of how we train them but reinforcing the behaviors you desire and ignoring the incorrect responses appears to be the fastest way to success. So, what is on your shopping list?