

How Dogs Learn Part 2



INFO

Learning by consequences

All animals—including us humans—learn through consequences. Depending on what the consequence is we may either repeat our actions, or decide not to. For instance you might have received a lollipop from the doctor or dentist as a child when you had behaved particularly well. If you liked the lollipop then on your next visit you were probably well behaved again so that you could earn another one. Or as a teenager coming home after your curfew your phone may have been taken away. Depending on how much you like your phone and therefore dislike its loss, you might be less inclined to stay out past curfew in the future.

Dogs learn in the same way—if we provide something they like after they do something, say a treat after they have sat, then they will be more likely to repeat that action in the future. If however we do something they don't like, say shouting at them when they eventually come back to us in the park, they may be less likely to repeat that in the future—making them even more reticent to come back to us.

Consequences work best when they follow the action immediately. Say my dog sits, then I rummage around for a treat to give him. By the time I've found the treat and then given it to him several seconds later its impact is lost. This is because in the time I took to deliver the treat he sneezed, sniffed the floor, and looked left. Then the treat appeared. As far as my dog is concerned the last thing he did before the treat was look left. I might eventually be able to teach my dog to sit when I ask, but it will probably take longer, or I might end up with a dog that habitually sits and then looks left because that's what he thinks pays off.



What does this mean for us?

We need precision and immediacy to train dogs most efficiently. Give your dog immediate feedback—let him know right away when he has done something you like. You can use praise, treats or other rewards like throwing a ball for him to chase, opening the door for him to access the garden, or taking the lead off so he can run.

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A dog's view of the world

Dogs are concerned with what works for them vs. what doesn't, they don't consider morals or right or wrong when deciding whether to do something or not.

All dogs try staring at the 'fridge as a strategy to get it to open. After a while though they give up because it doesn't work, the 'fridge never opens that way. They also try staring at people eating. Every once in a while someone gives in and shares a bite with them. Staring at people eating often works, so dogs continue to do it.

Why should we care?

Dogs don't do things we dislike to get back at us or because they are stubborn, or just to be naughty. This is a myth. To dogs the world is either safe or dangerous and things either work or they don't. Right or wrong never even enters into it, dogs just don't think that way.

Dogs will do what is safe and what works. That's it.

If a dog barks at you and you throw a ball for him, rest assured he'll try that strategy again. If you ignore the barking he will try something else. He isn't deliberately trying to be obnoxious, he is just doing what works. If you ask a dog to sit and he doesn't, he isn't being stubborn, you just haven't trained him well enough yet.

In other words, dogs are dogs, not furry people. Be patient with your dog and careful about what you pay attention to and what you ignore, and you will soon have a relaxed, content and well-trained four-legged friend.



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