

Don't Blame the Dog

Beth Bradley

My motto for my dog training business is simple: "Don't Blame the Dog!" When clients come to me with behavior issues, I usually find that the solution lies in teaching the client to communicate more clearly and/or consistently with the dog. Once the dog understands the desired behavior and the consequences for misbehavior, the dog stops the undesirable behavior—for the moment. Too often, however, the undesirable behavior returns because the client does not follow through after I am gone. I am called in for another training session to go over the exact same problems. Without follow through, the results of the second session (and the third, and the fourth, and so on) will be no more lasting than the first.

When I am called in to review the training for the same problem, clients often call their dogs stubborn or stupid. They blame their dogs for not responding to training when the fact is the dog probably stopped getting the actual training I taught almost as soon as I walked out the door. While some dogs certainly do have dominant temperaments that require a higher level of determination on the trainer's part, I have rarely met a dog that does not respond to consistently correct training.

Proof That Your Dog is Trainable (and you are too!)

Dogs are opportunists. If they think they can get away with something they will try. Dogs choose how to behave based on whether they think the rewards of their actions outweigh the risks. That means they must predict outcomes, evaluate options, and make choices based on evidence. That's actually pretty smart! (In fact, those very skills are included in the educational standards for most middle and high school students . . .) In other words, your dog has the skills and intelligence necessary for successful training. In order for you to provide successful training, you must also predict outcomes, evaluate options, and make choices based on evidence. Your dog can do it . . . can you?

Be Smarter Than Your Dog (or at least act like you are. . .)

There are some fundamental training principles that I teach in my lessons and classes.

- Stand up straight when giving commands.
- Do not repeat commands.
- Correct disobedience immediately.
- Use a quick pop and release for a leash correction.
- Keep a leash and training collar on your dog at all times when you are with him until he is reliably obedient. (And yes, "at all times" includes the times you are in your home.)

To put it bluntly, most training problems occur because people don't follow through on these basic training principles or the strategies I have taught for a specific behaviour problem. When I show someone how a correction can stop a dog from nipping or jumping it doesn't mean the problem is gone forever. After I leave, he will first test to see if *you* will correct him for jumping. Then, he will test to see if you correct him for *all* jumping. And, even after he has stopped jumping for a few days, he will eventually try again to make sure you still feel the same way about jumping. Jumping is very rewarding, so a dog will find the risk of trying again worthwhile. He will continue to try until he has exhausted the options and reached the conclusion that there are no circumstances under which a jump does not get corrected. You must provide incontrovertible evidence that every jump carries a 100% risk of a correction that overshadows the fun of jumping on you.

However, if you do not follow through on these basics, you can predict with a high degree of certainty that your dog's misbehaviour will not only continue but will probably get worse. The risk of not following through is that you will ultimately spend enormous amounts of time and energy dealing with your dog's behaviour problems. Additionally, you increase the risk that your dog will be injured or will injure someone else because you cannot control him. (Even a friendly dog can cause injury if he is out of control.) And when I am called back to re-address a behaviour problem for which the dog is being blamed, I predict (and I'm usually right) that we will discover one of the basic training rules I have taught is not being followed.

Correcting Misperceptions

Training a dog is not easy or quick, but the process simple. An appropriate correction will stop an undesirable behaviour. Correcting the undesirable behaviour *every time it occurs* will eventually eliminate the behaviour. After demonstrating in lessons and classes the method for correction, I observe each dog and handler. I provide guidance and feedback on the level and timing of correction. I point out any errors in the correction and review the correct method. I answer questions about how to correct. By the end of even one class, it is abundantly clear that appropriate correction is fundamental to successful training. Nonetheless, many people remain ambivalent about correcting their dogs. Why?

I feel sorry for my dog when I correct him. I feel sorry for your dog because he wants and needs a leader and you aren't giving him one. I also feel sorry for the kid your dog knocked down; I feel sorry for your family who can't leave anything within the dog's reach because he'll steal it; I feel sorry for your neighbors who have to listen to your dog's incessant barking. The list could go on and on.

I don't want my dog to fear me. A puppy doesn't fear its mother and she corrects with her teeth! In fact, you are more likely to make your dog fear you—or at least be anxious around you—if you sometimes let him get away with misbehaviour and sometimes you blow your stack. When you are inconsistent, your dog cannot make the connection between his actions and your reaction. He just thinks you are unpredictable and scary.

I just have to look at my dog and he knows he's doing something wrong. Amazing! Your dog must be a long-lost descendant of Rin-Tin-Tin or Lassie because only fictional movie dogs are born with the ability to receive telepathic communications about human morality and ethics.

I can get my dog to behave using rewards rather than corrections. No, you can't. Praise and treats have their place in training, but they cannot be used exclusively. From your dog's perspective, the world is full of "rewards" and many of these "rewards" are far more appealing than anything you have in your pocket. When your dog is in the mood to chase a squirrel, that little piece of cheese you offer is not going to convince him otherwise. Worse yet, he may actually think you are rewarding him because he is chasing the squirrel! Rewards are useful for eliciting and reinforcing a desired behaviour, but without corrections, your dog will always view obedience as optional.

Correcting Correctly

For some people, the problem with follow through isn't *if* they should correct, but *how* they correct. For correction to be effective, you must give the right kind of correction, at the right time, and at the right level.

The Right Kind For most dogs, the right kind of correction is a quick "pop-and-release" leash correction that mimics the corrective bite of a mother dog.

The Wrong Kind The mistake most people make when they give a leash correction is that they forget to release! Giving a long pull on the leash or keeping the leash tight all the time just makes your dog pull against the leash, creating an ineffective tug-of-war.

The Right Level The correct level of correction is the level that makes your dog stop the behavior. For some dogs, a verbal correction is sufficient, but in most cases a leash correction is needed. You can determine if you are using the right level of correction by whether or not your dog repeats the behavior. If he immediately returns to the behavior, the correction was not meaningful enough. You need to pop the leash firmly enough that your dog immediately stops the behavior and does not try to repeat it after the correction.

The Wrong Level Finding the appropriate level of correction may take a few tries, but once you have found it you must stick to it! Don't "lighten up" on the correction. A tentative tug does not communicate correction to your dog, so don't blame him if he continues to misbehave because you are not following through with the appropriate level of correction.

The Right Time Ideally, you will catch your dog in the act of misbehaving so that correction is immediate. Your timing ensures that your dog clearly connects that correction to his actions. Of course, in order to administer an immediate correction, you must be paying attention and have a way to correct! If your dog steals a bagel from the counter and you either don't see him or can't catch him and correct him he will do it again tomorrow. You might call that stubborn. . . I call it intelligent. He has figured out that stealing a bagel gets him a tasty treat with no consequences! Most of us can remember being amazed that our parents seemed to know when we were up to something—even when we thought they couldn't see us. Your dog needs to believe that you, too, have "eyes in the back of your head." If he believes you are all-seeing and all-knowing, he will be less likely to risk misbehaving.

The Wrong Time If you allow a behavior—such as jumping or barking—to continue until you just can't take it anymore it is unfair to lose your temper and blame the dog. If you had corrected immediately after the first instance of the misbehaviour, it would not have escalated. A correction should be delivered by a firm, fair, and predictable leader—not a crazy person.

Conclusion

Don't blame your dog for being smart! If he has caught on to your lack of follow through in training, he will not change his behavior until you change yours! I know that in the hustle and bustle of every day life, it isn't always convenient to follow through. Maybe you are in a hurry; maybe you are tired; or maybe you just think the dog's behaviour is cute or funny. But when you weigh the risks of not following through against the rewards of being consistent and persistent the evidence is clear. Your dog needs you to step up and teach him how to behave. Let go of the fears, excuses, and rationalizations that prevent you from correcting your dog's misbehavior. Invest the energy to learn the basic training principles and apply them consistently at all times. Then, you can stop blaming your dog and start training your dog!

About Beth Bradley

As one of the top professional trainers and competitors in the United States, Beth is committed to improving the lives of dogs and people through training. She teaches group classes and private lessons in basic and advanced obedience, competition dog training, puppy training, Schutzhund training, personal protection, Canine Good Citizenship, and therapy dog training.

Beth also trains and places service dogs for children with autism and custom trains “cross-trained” companion/protection dogs for families and individuals. She consults for shelters in the tri-state area and for New Jersey law enforcement on cases involving canine behavior and temperament.

Beth began studying animal behavior and dog training at age twelve. She has worked and studied under many renowned animal behaviorists and trainers. After graduating from Rutgers University with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice, Beth worked as a New Jersey State Animal Control Officer. In 1989, she founded her own company and has made dog training and consulting her full-time career since 1995. Competing with her dogs, Beth has earned national and international titles, championships, and honors in both Schutzhund and AKC Obedience. In 2003 and 2009, she represented the United States in the FCI World Trials. In 2015, Beth will compete as a member of the US team at the WUSV trials in Finland.

Beth is the author of *Real World Dog Training*, and has produced a number of training DVDs and videos. In addition, Beth trains and handles dogs for movies and television, with recent credits including *Board Walk Empire*, the *Batman* franchise, *Damages*, *Blue Bloods*, *The Good Wife*, and *The Blacklist*.

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