

## **Don't Blame the Dog**

**Beth Bradley**

My motto for my dog training business is simple: “Don't Blame the Dog!” When a client initially comes to me for help with a dog's behavior issues, I usually find that the solution lies in teaching the client the basic training principles for communicating clearly 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 need to return to review or repeat training for the same problem, some people ask if their dogs are stupid. They blame their dogs for not responding to training when the fact is, the dog is probably no longer getting the actual training I taught. 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. And the behavior problem is hardly ever connected to a lack of intelligence in the dog.

### **Your Dog is Trainable (and you are too!)**

Dogs are opportunists. If they think they can get away with something they will try. 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, your dog will 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. While some dogs may quickly grasp that there are no circumstances under which jumping does not get corrected, others may take more time. This is not stupidity—it is persistence. And in many cases, the dog's persistence pays off. The person stops correcting and tries other methods—offering treats, talking to the dog, or just pushing the dog off. From the dog's point of view, this is fabulous! Not only does he get to continue jumping, he also gets extra attention and some treats in the bargain. Not so stupid.

Dogs choose how to behave based on whether they think the rewards of their actions outweigh the risks. That means they evaluate options and make choices based on evidence and experience. That's actually pretty smart! (In fact, those very skills are included in the educational standards for most middle and high school students . . .) In order for you to provide successful training, you must also evaluate options and make choices based on evidence and experience. Your dog can do it . . . can you?

## **Be Smarter Than Your Dog (or at least more persistent . . .)**

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.
- Don't give up or give in.
- 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.)

If you are consistent and persistent in following these principles, your dog will learn that disobedience is no longer rewarding. He won't be evaluating obedience versus disobedience because disobedience will no longer seem like a viable option. It always gets corrected and he never gets away with it, so what's the point in trying? However, if you do not follow through on these basics, your dog's misbehavior will not only continue, but will probably get worse. Each instance of successful disobedience will reinforce his idea that disobedience is an option. Every situation will become a battle of wills. Your dog will test you at every turn, because he has learned that sometimes you don't follow through. Ultimately, you will spend enormous amounts of time and energy dealing with your dog's behavior 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.) You will spend less time with him because taking him out and about will become a labor-intensive chore. These are the two options you must evaluate: Invest the time and energy now to consistently apply the training principles that will teach your dog to be obedient or spend his lifetime in a constant struggle of trying to manage his misbehavior.

The choice seems obvious, yet when I am called back to re-address a behavior problem for which the dog is being blamed, I usually discover that one of the basic training rules I have taught is not being followed. People get discouraged, tired, or pressed for time. They may be doing the training properly at home but claim they can't do it when out for a walk because there are too many distractions. Remember our persistent jumping dog? He persisted in his behavior until he had tested every possible situation. Good training requires you to be at least as persistent as your dog and stick to the training in every possible situation. Unfortunately, over time, and sometimes not very much time, people ease up in one way or another. They may start repeating commands or bending down to talk to the dog. However, most often, the problem is that the dog is not being corrected appropriately or consistently.

## Correcting Misperceptions About Correction

Training a dog is not easy or quick, but the process is straightforward. An appropriate correction will stop an undesirable behavior. Correcting the undesirable behavior *every time it occurs* will eventually eliminate the behavior. 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 method of correction and review the appropriate way to correct. I answer questions about how to correct. I explain why a single meaningful correction is better than repeated or inconsistent little corrections. 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, too, but for different reasons. I feel sorry for your dog because he wants and needs a leader and you aren't giving him one. I feel sorry for your dog because a dog that doesn't listen is at much higher risk for getting injured or lost. I also feel sorry for the kid your dog will or already has 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. The point is, your dog doesn't need you to feel sorry for him. He needs you to teach him the safe and socially acceptable ways to behave.

***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 fearful or anxious if you sometimes let him get away with misbehavior 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.

***It's hard to correct him when we are out for a walk.*** No, it is not difficult to correct if you focus all your attention on your dog. If you have multiple dogs, walk them separately until each is reliably well-behaved. If you walk with friends, you may have to give that up for a while. And if you talk on your phone while you walk your dog . . . well, do I really need to say it?

***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." Barking, jumping, getting into the trash, stealing food, making you chase him rather than coming when called—these behaviors are all "self-rewarding," and the rewards are far more appealing than anything you might 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 behavior, 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** Some (very few) dogs respond to verbal correction. However, for most dogs, the right kind of correction is a quick "pop-and-release" leash correction that briefly tightens the training collar to mimic the corrective grip on the neck that a mother dog or other lead dog uses.

**The Wrong Kind** The mistake most people make with 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** 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 immediately after the correction.

**The Wrong Level** If your dog repeats the behavior shortly after your correction, you are not correcting firmly enough. Don't panic if your dog yelps the first few times you give him a firm correction. That yelp is most often a sound of surprise, not pain. Puppies will also yelp or whimper after a correction to emphasize their submissiveness. It's the dog version of a toddler crying "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry" when the look on Mom or Dad's face indicates that a line has been crossed. So do not be alarmed if your dog vocalizes after a correction. It is unlikely that you have hurt anything but his pride. On the other hand, do not go overboard on a correction because you are frustrated. If you correct in anger, you will administer an inappropriately harsh correction. A correction should be delivered by a firm, fair, and predictable leader—not an angry or frustrated person. If you are having a tough day, take your dog for a nice long walk. The exercise will help you relax and will help Fido burn up some energy. On the up side, a tired dog has less energy for trouble!

**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 the correction to his own action (or lack of action). 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 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** A correction delivered at the wrong time will always be unproductive and sometimes counterproductive. A poorly timed correction will only confuse your dog. If your dog is frequently confused about the reason for the correction, he will become anxious or fearful. The wrong time to correct is when your dog will not connect the correction to the specific misbehavior you wish to correct—usually because time has passed. For example, if your dog shreds your favorite pillow while you are out, then takes a nap, wakes up, has a drink of water, walks around the house, and then greets you joyfully when you come in the door he will have no idea that your displeasure is related to the pillow. Too much time has passed and too many other things have happened in the meantime. Your dog connects a correction (or any other indication that you are unhappy) with whatever is happening at that moment.

Furthermore, if you allow a behavior—such as jumping or barking—to continue until you just can't take it anymore, then it is unfair to lose your temper and blame the dog. If you had corrected immediately after the first instance of the misbehavior, it would not have escalated. Your dog will have trouble connecting the correction to his behavior because that same behavior went uncorrected several times. He may be smart, but he can't read your mind.

### **Conclusion**

Don't blame your dog for being smart! If he has cleverly caught on to your lack of follow through in training, he will continue to repeat the same undesirable behaviors. 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 behavior 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. Make the smart choice: 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 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 individuals 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 and championships in both Schutzhund and AKC Obedience. In 2003 and 2009, she represented the United States in the FCI World Trials. In 2015, Beth and her dog Fyte qualified for the elite team representing the United States at the WUSV in Finland. Although Fyte is the youngest qualifying dog in the history of this worldwide competition, Beth and Fyte ranked third among the US competitors and posted scores that placed the US team in the top ten. Fyte and Beth went on to earn the title of USCA IPO 2015 Vice Champion and compete with the US Team at the 2016 World Trials in Meppen, Germany. In 2016, Beth's training made Fyte the highest ranked dog in United States, when they competed in and won the USCA/IPO Nationals Championship.

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, television, and theater, with recent credits including appearances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, in *Board Walk Empire*, the *Batman* franchise, *Damages*, *Blue Bloods*, *The Good Wife*, *The Blacklist*, *Gotham*, and *Billions*.

Beth offers a variety of group classes as well as private lessons.

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