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Are You Rewarding Bad Behavior?

Often, my job consists of breaking a dog's bad habits or changing bad behavior. A family may have been trying for weeks or even months to correct an undesirable behavior, and they cannot understand why the dog is not responding to their training. When I am called in, I usually find that the dog IS responding to the training. The family has been training the dog to repeat the bad behavior by rewarding it in ways they don't even realize!

Unknowingly Reinforcing Misbehavior

When your dog is doing something wrong, your first instinct is to get him to stop—in the fastest way possible. When you use these “panic tactics,” you are unwittingly rewarding the behavior and practically ensuring that it will be repeated in the future. Your actions indicate to the dog that the behavior must be good because it results in outcomes he finds rewarding.

Nobody ever intends to reward bad behavior. Unfortunately, in the heat of the moment, we resort to what seems like the quickest fix. However, a short-term solution can create a long-term problem!

Sample Scenario # 1: Imagine that your dog grabs a pillow from the couch and runs. You immediately run after him to get the pillow back, probably shouting at him while you run. You try grabbing the pillow, but he hangs on tight. Desperate to save your pillow, you go to the cookie jar. That's the ticket! Your dog succumbs to the bribe and you get the pillow back. Your “panic tactics” have saved the pillow, but here's what your dog has learned: *Stealing a couch pillow initiates a rollicking game of chase complete with human barking and a little tug-of-war thrown in for extra fun. After the games, it's cookies for everyone! Hooray! That was FUN! Let's do it again!* Congratulations: You have successfully trained your dog to steal couch pillows.

Sample Scenario # 2 You take your dog out; he does his business; you praise him and play a little. Then, you return inside. When you get inside, you take off his leash and give him a treat. When you sit down, he begins barking and running to the door again. You want him to let you know when he has to go out to relieve himself, so you praise him and take him out again. Maybe he relieves himself again, maybe not. You figure better safe than sorry! When you bring him back inside, you take off his leash and give him a treat. Unfortunately, in this scenario, you are not rewarding the

behavior you think you are rewarding. He's not barking to let you know he needs to relieve himself. He's barking to let you know he'd like to go outside to look around and then have a treat when he comes back in.

By the time you realize you are being manipulated, the damage is done. You have been rewarding your dog's demands for attention—and you have trained him to bark and run to the door when he is bored and wants a treat.

With dogs, even more than with people, actions speak louder than words. And--whether you know it or not—your actions may be providing or allowing the reward that is causing your dog to continue a bad behavior!

There are a number of common scenarios in which what seems to be the expedient response sends the wrong message to your dog by rewarding an undesirable behavior.

Undesirable Behavior	Common Human Response	Dog Translation
Dog barks incessantly.	Yelling	<i>Hooray! We're ALL barking now! I LIKE group barking!</i>
	Giving a treat or chew toy to quiet the dog.	<i>When I want a chew toy or treat I can get one by barking a lot!</i>
Fearful or aggressive dog disobeys or ignores commands.	Soothing and petting to calm fearful dog	<i>I'm disobeying but my person is still being extra nice to me. What's going on? The situation must be even worse than I thought! I can't be obedient right now! I've got to handle this catastrophe myself!</i>
Dog steals things.	Chasing, grabbing, yelling, bribery.	<i>After I steal something we play games and I get a treat. It's a win-win!</i>
Dog does not respond to command the first time you say it.	Repeating command in a coaxing tone of voice: "Good boy, come on now, sit. . . you can do it. . . sit...be a good boy"	<i>I'm not sitting but clearly I'm so wonderful it doesn't matter WHAT I do or WHEN I do it. . . Hear that? I'm a GOOD BOY!</i>
Dog demands attention by	Petting and talking to dog to	<i>I am the center of the</i>

pawing at you, nosing you or bringing you toys.	settle him down or just because he's so cute.	<i>universe!!! If I WANT attention, I can GET attention!</i>
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Control, Correct, Contain

If you recognize yourself and your dog in these, or similar scenarios, you may be wondering what you should be doing differently. Successful training depends on your being ready and able to respond immediately and appropriately to your dog's behavior. Therefore, you must always be in a position to control and/or correct your dog's behavior. When you cannot be in a position to control and correct your dog, he should be safely contained.

When are you in a position to control and correct?

- Your dog is wearing a collar and leash.
- You have the time and energy to focus on supervising his behavior.
- You are willing and able to give an immediate correction for unacceptable behavior.

Until your dog is trained, you will need to accept some inconveniences to maximize his supervised time. For example, you can practice his down/stay when you are watching television or reading, but you should be prepared for interruptions when you need to correct him for breaking the down/stay. At the same time, be realistic. If you are entertaining or making an important phone call, you will not be able to focus on your dog's behavior. At times like these, or at any time when you cannot supervise your dog's behavior, contain him in his crate and remove the collar.

If you control, correct, and contain your dog appropriately, you can avoid situations in which you accidentally reward bad behavior by desperately doing whatever it takes to make a behavior stop.

Make the Undesirable Behavior Difficult to Complete

If your dog does something once, it may be a coincidence; if your dog does the same thing twice or more, he is probably getting some kind of reward that is causing him to repeat the behavior. He is forming (or has already formed) a bad habit. Knowing your dog's habits allows you to stay one step ahead of him.

Until you are confident that your dog truly knows a behavior is off limits, it's up to you to make it difficult (preferably impossible) for him to complete when you are not in a position to control or correct him. For example, if you know that your dog jumps on guests as they arrive at your home, do not give him the opportunity to do so. When guests are coming, crate your dog. When you are in the midst of entertaining, you won't have the time or the inclination to appropriately correct his unacceptable behavior and he will be rewarded with attention, excitement, and noise each time he charges toward a new arrival at the door.

If your dog steals couch pillows—don't leave them out for him to take when you are sitting down to watch your favorite television show. If your dog chews shoes, don't leave

them on the floor where he can find them. You know the circumstances under which your dog tends to misbehave, so stay on top of the situation. Of course, you can't spend the rest of your dog's life running around removing temptation. So how will your dog learn?

Recreate the Situation: Training Through Entrapment

Your dog will learn to stop an undesirable behavior because you will “set him up” when you are prepared to correct the behavior. If your dog jumps on guests, enlist the help of friends to pretend to arrive at the door during a training session when you can correct the jumping. If your dog steals couch pillows, put some pillows (preferably ones you don't care much about) on the couch and pretend to be doing something else while actually keeping an eye on the would-be thief. Remember, the key is to have his collar and leash on so that you can administer immediate consequences.

When you re-create the situation, you will be ready to use appropriate responses that correct and/or discourage the behavior. Yes, it's entrapment. But it's the most effective way to catch your dog in the act so you can respond immediately.

So what are the appropriate and effective responses?

- Make the undesirable behavior unrewarding.
- Associate the undesirable behavior with undesirable consequences.
- Replace the bad habit with a good habit.

Of course, you should not expect an overnight miracle. Studies show that it takes humans at least 30 days to break a bad habit. It can take months to break a dog's bad habit. Because you may have been unwittingly rewarding the bad habit, it may take time for your dog to accept that a reward is no longer forthcoming! However, if you are consistent and persistent in using these strategies to respond to your dog's misbehavior, his behavior will change.

Make an undesirable behavior unrewarding. Often, the reward your dog gets for misbehaving is your attention. If you are chasing, shouting, talking to, bribing, or otherwise negotiating with your dog, his behavior is being reinforced because he is getting your attention. To make misbehavior *unrewarding*, you must withhold the attention he wants. Of course, ignoring the behavior completely just might get your sofa pillows destroyed, so you must do something, and quickly. Calmly and firmly give your dog a drop it command. Immediately correct if he does not obey. Do NOT reward him for dropping the pillow. Instead, run your dog through a few additional commands, such as sit and down. Then, and only then, you may give your dog a treat. In this way, you have separated the undesirable behavior from the reward.

In your dog's mind, nothing particularly exciting or fun happened after he got the pillow. You didn't chase him, bark with him, play tug-of-war, or trade the pillow for a treat. Stealing a pillow has become unrewarding. On the other hand, after he obeyed commands, he got a treat! *Yippee! Obeying commands must be good!*

Similarly, a dog who jumps on you or on guests coming through the door is being rewarded by attention. When you re-create the situation, instruct your “guests” to ignore your dog. Put your foot on the leash so he cannot jump. Do not talk to your dog to settle him down. Talking to him rewards him with attention. Instead, make the behavior unrewarding by ignoring him (other than to control him with the collar and leash) and having your “guest” ignore him as well.

At first, your dog may try hard to get your attention. Frustrated that his behavior is not getting the usual response, he may become even more excited and agitated. Be strong. Do not give in to the temptation to “talk him down.” And although removing the reward of attention is a start, you will probably need to correct as well.

Associate an undesirable behavior with undesirable consequences. When you learn to avoid accidentally rewarding bad behavior, you have taken a huge step in training your dog. However, your dog will need additional reinforcement to overcome most of his undesirable behaviors. For example, when you re-create “guests at the door,” your dog will probably resume jumping soon as you take your foot off the leash. When he does, use the collar and leash to give a firm correction.

A meaningful correction administered immediately after the undesirable behavior tells your dog that his misbehavior has an undesirable outcome. Timing and consistency are the keys to teaching your dog to make this association. If you give the correction too late or do not give the correction every time your dog misbehaves, he will not connect the misbehavior to the correction.

As mentioned earlier, it is vital that your dog wears his leash and correction collar at all times when you are with him. You must always be in a position to give a firm, immediate correction for misbehavior. Eventually, he will stop engaging in the undesirable behaviors. However, until he is well and truly trained, keep the leash and collar on!

Replace the undesirable behavior with a desired behavior. Your dog learns quickly which behaviors get your attention—and he repeats those behaviors because he craves your attention. Use your dog’s desire for your attention to replace bad behavior with good behavior. For example, when you re-create the “guests at the door” scenario, you and your “guests” withhold attention when your dog is jumping and barking. However, your dog still wants attention—so give him something to do that will earn that reward. Teach him to sit or down in a designated spot instead of jumping when someone arrives. Praise him when he does so.

Re-creating the situations in which your dog misbehaves gives you the best opportunity to respond appropriately and immediately to misbehavior. Remember, though, that training happens all the time. If your dog misbehaves outside of a planned training session, you must still avoid rewarding him for his behavior and correct him. Of course it is tempting when you are watching your favorite show to give your dog a cookie to stop his barking. However, each time you choose the easy way out, you are extending the amount of time you will have to live with the misbehavior.

Don’t Be Fooled!

Some dogs demand attention by nosing your leg, bringing you toys, putting a paw on you—all the while looking at you with big imploring eyes. While these behaviors are much cuter than pillow stealing, they are still undesirable. Your dog should never be allowed to demand attention and you should never reward his demands for attention—no matter how cute they seem!

If your dog tries demanding your attention, do not pet him, talk to him, or give him treats. Any of these responses rewards him for demanding your attention. Even if you do not believe the nosing or the pawing will ever cause a problem (and they will, eventually) allowing your dog to demand attention suggests to him that he is in charge and therefore undermines your other training efforts. When you want to give your dog attention, you should initiate the attention by calling him to you. In this way, you are rewarding him for coming when called, not for demanding attention.

Conclusion

Your dog's behavior is influenced by your responses. If you react to his misbehavior in a way that he finds rewarding, your dog will repeat the very behaviors you want him to stop. When people accidentally reward misbehavior, it is often because they are reacting in the moment and will do whatever it takes to get the behavior to stop. The best way to avoid this mistake is to set up a re-creation of the problem so that you can give your full concentration to correcting and controlling your dog in a training situation. Your dog will learn that his undesirable behavior will not be rewarded and in fact will have unpleasant consequences. Then, you can teach your dog to replace the bad behavior with a good behavior—and that's a rewarding situation for you and 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.

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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