

What Causes Disobedience?

Beth Bradley

Anyone who has been to one of my classes has heard me say that dogs are opportunists: If they think they can get away with something they will try. This is true. It is also true that most dogs want to please their owners. These two facts may seem contradictory—if a dog wants to please its owner, why would he try to get away with something? In other words, if my dog wants me to be happy, why does he disobey?

There's No "I" in "Why?" (But there should be.)

There are a number of factors that can contribute to a dog's failure to obey commands. None of them indicate a desire to make you unhappy—even if that is the actual result of your dog's disobedience. When your dog does not comply with one of your commands, his disobedience probably stems from one of these causes.

Ignorance: If you have not thoroughly taught a command, your dog does not know what you want him to do.

Inconsistency: If you are inconsistent in your response to undesirable behavior, your dog will be inconsistent in his response to your commands.

Ingrained behavior: If you (or a previous owner) have allowed an undesirable behavior to go uncorrected, your dog has probably formed some bad habits that are deeply ingrained and will take time and intense effort to change.

Insufficient exercise: If your dog is not getting enough exercise, his excess energy will make it difficult for him to be calm and focused during training.

You are the one in control of these aspects of your dog's life and training. So when your dog misbehaves or disobeys, the answer to "Why?" almost always begins with "I". *I am inconsistent. I have not properly taught the command. I have allowed undesirable behavior. I am not giving my dog enough exercise.* Not to put too fine a point on it, but *you* are the *I* in the *why*. The good news is, if your actions are contributing to the problem, then changing your actions can contribute to the solution!

Back to the Basics

If your dog repeatedly disobeys a particular command, it is likely he doesn't know what you want him to do. Go back to the basics and reteach the command.

1. First, say the command. (Sit)
2. Then, use body language, gestures, and luring to get the desired behavior. (Luring is like giving a clue. Use a gesture, such as lifting your hand above your dog's head, to get the head up and the rear end down. During the initial teaching phase, having a treat in your hand increases the likelihood that you have your dog's undivided attention.)
3. As soon as the dog is performing the desired behavior and before he starts doing something else, reward him. (Praise verbally without getting him too excited. If he remains sitting, give him a pet and a treat. If he stands up before you get a treat to him, do not give it. He will associate the treat with standing.)

Review the command with your dog several times a day. Soon, he will connect the word you are saying with the behavior you expect.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Once your dog knows the meaning of a command, you must practice to ensure that he masters the command.

- **Practice in a variety of locations and add distractions as your dog progresses.** When you use a command in a new location, you may have to go back to the basics again until your dog understands that the command means the same thing in different places. However, don't change the training or your expectation of obedience just because you are out and about in a place with distractions. Obedience is even more critical in an environment with distractions and activity. Often, I see clients baby-talking their disobedient dogs in new situations and excusing disobedience because "He's nervous." Baby-talking your dog only reinforces his nervousness. In contrast, remaining calm, firm, and consistent builds his confidence in you as a leader.
- **Practice with consistent corrections and randomized rewards.** Your dog needs you to be consistent in your corrections so he can make the association between his disobedience and the correction. This means correcting each and every time he disobeys and always at the appropriate level. The correction should be firm enough that a single correction gets the desired result. Consistency is critical to effective correction. In contrast, randomizing rewards achieves better and more lasting results than treating for every act of obedience. Once your dog has mastered a command, treat him intermittently. In between treats, use verbal praise and/or a pat to let your dog know he has done the right thing. Also, remember to use your release word to end an exercise. Your dog should not assume that obedience ends once he has his treat.
- **Practice problem areas strategically.** For specific and seemingly intractable problems, build toward success. Always make sure your dog has had enough

exercise. Then, “stage” the situation so you can control the variables rather than trying to address a jumping problem while real company arrives. Give your dog a command such as “sit/stay” “go to place.” Correct if your dog disobeys that command or breaks when the “company” comes in the door. When you release your dog from the command to greet the arrival, correct your dog if he jumps. Gradually introduce more tempting and challenging scenarios and use the “off” command to remind your dog to avoid jumping. Similarly, if your dog frequently picks things up off the ground or steals items around the house, provide extra practice on the “drop it” and “leave it” commands. Additionally, keep the training collar and leash on so you can correct every instance of disobedience of these commands throughout the day.

If you practice correctly every day, your dog will learn to respond immediately to a single command. If you change your training based on your own level of patience or time, your dog will not learn that there is one command and one acceptable response.

Extenuating Circumstances . . .

A few other factors can interfere with compliance to commands. These are not excuses for misbehavior. These are challenges that can—and must—be overcome with patience, persistence, and practice.

- **Stress** If your dog is stressed, he may freeze up or offer different behaviors that have earned your praise in the past. Stress can be caused by anxiety or excitement. Your dog may be stressed because he is frightened about something in his environment, or because he is unsure what you want. Alternatively, his stress may be caused by a competing drive (*I really, really want that tennis ball, but you are making me stay!*) The best way to handle stress disobedience is to take a step back and “re-teach” the command under stress in short training sessions. Gradually increase the “training-under-stress” time as your dog’s ability to tolerate and obey under stress improves. Make sure that you are praising and rewarding compliance. With continued calm, consistent practice, your dog’s obedience under stress will improve.
- **Immaturity** Young dogs have poor impulse control. The spirit is willing, but the furry flesh is weak. Your dog may experience set backs when it looks as if he never heard the word “sit.” Remain patient and consistent. Do not get discouraged or give up. Your dog will outgrow his immaturity, but he cannot outgrow a lack of training.

- **Temperament** Temperament doesn't cause disobedience—but it can make achieving obedience more challenging. If your dog has a dominant temperament, it may take him a little longer to get the message that you are the decision maker. Don't give up! The only thing harder than training a dog with a dominant temperament is living with an untrained dog with a dominant temperament.

Under any of these extenuating circumstances it is important to keep the following training precepts in mind.

- **Be Fair.** Don't add significant distractions or stress until you are sure your dog has learned and understands the command you are practicing.
- **Be Firm** The correction should be significant enough that the dog does not repeat the disobedience for some time after the correction.
- **Be Fun!** Celebrate and reward obedience! Make a fuss when your dog succeeds—especially under challenging or stressful conditions.

Conclusion

Being dogs, our canine companions face some challenges learning and complying with our human rules. Although they are highly adaptable to living with humans, dogs aren't born knowing what we want them to do. We are their teachers and their guides. Almost everything our dogs do is a result of our teaching methods-- or lack thereof. So the next time Fido "disobeys," remember, he can only be as good as you train him to be.

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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