

Windbiter Australian Shepherds and Dog Training

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Myths and History

Before we begin, I want to disabuse you of some common myths. First, your dog is not willing to please. No dog is. Dogs are the most cheerfully selfish creatures in the world and are constantly on the lookout for number one. That fact is your tool in learning to teach your dog new behaviors.

Second, your dog is not going to do things for you because he loves you. Dogs are great believers in a universal living wage. You must pay your dog, pay him well and pay him in the coin he is willing to accept or you are not going anywhere.

Third, your dog does not remember slights and carry grudges or do bad things to get even. All animals learn behaviors in similar ways and dogs are no exception. They simply don't have the mental capacity to do those kinds of mental gymnastics. Don't assign motives where they don't exist. All you will do is frustrate yourself and drive your dog nuts.

Dogs evolved in North America. Like horses, they went east to west across the Siberian land bridge to Asia quite a bit earlier than people came easy to North America. The earliest remains (so far) of fully modern dogs were found in a dig in Holland. These remains were found buried with human remains and were dated at 32,000 years BP. Since dogs are found with people everywhere on the globe, it is not unreasonable to assume that dogs made it to Africa and hooked up with people around 50,000 years ago and followed us back out of Africa. In a very real sense, dogs and humans co-evolved and have been together ever since people have been people.

In my own opinion that is based on observation, neither people or dogs are quite complete without each other.

Unlike people, dogs don't have language in their tool kit. This is why I suggest that you teach using hand gestures and body language and only add the words after the behavior is mastered. If you accept the timeline above, dogs have been watching us for 50,000 years. As a result, dogs are not only better at reading human body language than other non-human primates, they are frequently better at reading us than we are at reading each other.

Lesson One

Learning and Management

Dogs, like almost all animals, are kinesthetic learners, which simply means that dogs learn by doing. There are two sources for action.

They are *internal* - the dog figures out what to do on its own and *external* - in that the dog is moved by an outside agent. Not surprisingly, it makes a difference in how fast a dog learns and how well it retains what it learns, depending on where the action originates. Internal or emotive action is the most powerful learning tool available to the trainer. The trainer observes the dog's actions and captures desired behaviors and then shapes them by marking and rewarding the behaviors. Simple behaviors can be caught and shaped in one or two brief sessions and the dog will retain them for life. More complex behaviors can be build by stringing together and shaping simple behaviors. The down side for many trainers is that the dog is in control and it requires patience on the part of the trainer to wait out the dog. It also requires that the trainer be extremely observant of the dog since the first behaviors are subtle and quick.

External behaviors are solicited or induced. Solicited behaviors are all a form of luring. That is a desired resource (food, toy, play, etc.) is used to lead or encourage the initiation of the behavior. Induced behaviors are modeled by physically moving a dog into the desired position or behavior. These actions extend the continuum of learning, but are progressively less and less effective or retained. An example of how all of these can be used to teach a simple behavior is sitting. The dog knows how to sit and if the trainer is patient enough, he can capture the sit by marking it with a clicker and rewarding it with food, toy or praise. The trainer can progressively shape the sit by rewarding only those sits that meet his desires for speed, position, location, etc. The trainer can speed up the initial process by using a lure to raise the dog's head and lead him into a sit. Lastly, the trainer can knock the knees out from under the dog by sweeping his hand forward against the back of the dog's knees to lower the back end of the dog. This last is the swiftest for the trainer, but virtually useless in terms of teaching the dog anything about sitting. I would encourage you to use capture and shaping where ever possible and avoid modeling unless it simply necessary to get the dog into a particular position one time without expecting the dog to learn anything.

Related to this is the difference between training and management. Training is to teach the dog to walk nicely at heel and ignore distractions. For this to be effective, the dog has to figure out that this is the best way to get what it wants. Management is to put a halter, prong collar or other device on the dog so that it physically cannot do anything but walk nicely at heal. That is part of the reason why I request that you not use choke chains, prong collars or similar devices. The dog doesn't learn the desired behavior through their use. The other reason is that the use of them encourages their abuse. This may result in serious injury to your dog and will certainly wear away the sense of trust and partnership that is needed in any relationship.

Punishment or aversive training

I am not going to teach you how to use aversives to train your dog. There are two primary reasons. First, is that to do it effectively, you have to be perfectly consistent, precisely metered and perfectly timed. To be that good takes years of practice and no small amount of luck. None of us are that good.

Second, it teaches the dog that the only safe behavior is no behavior at all. Offering new or creative behaviors is a sure way to get punished. Your dog learns to shut down and avoid trusting you. For most of us, that is too high a price to pay for a well behaved dog.

Clicker training

Clicker training is a use of a type of teaching called Operant Conditioning. This is so called because it is a method that conditions the pupil (your dog) to operate (through his behavior) on his environment (you) to provide him with a reward. The clicker is used because it allows you to accurately and precisely mark the behavior that you want. This reduces the confusion as to what exactly the dog did that resulted in the reward. It doesn't have to be a click and the reward doesn't have to be food. With dolphins the marker is usually a whistle or bell. In training drug sniffing or search and rescue dogs, the reward is usually a chance to play with a tennis ball. We typically use a clicker and food reward with most dogs because it is quick and easy and it works.

The basic premise behind clicker training is that that which is rewarded gets repeated. That is it in a nutshell. At the beginning, you need to teach the dog that the clicker means that something good is about to happen. This is called loading the clicker and is straight up classical conditioning. This is done by clicking and tossing a treat on the floor. Depending on the dog, this may be as few as six and as many as a hundred. Most dogs are in the ten to twenty range so it goes pretty quickly. You only have to do it the first time, not before each session. This created a little flush of anticipatory pleasure each time the dog hears the clicker. Because the click is timed to coincide with the behavior you are trying to teach, the dog learns to associate the spark of pleasure with the behavior.

Obviously it is more complex in action and I will discuss that as we go on. Before that however I want to discuss positive and negative rewards. There are two kinds of each.

Positive is when you add something.. Negative is when you take something away. Rewards are something the dog desires and will work for. Punishment is something the dog dislikes and will try to avoid. Good and bad are entirely from the dog's perspective. Examples of good things happening (rewards) are treats, play, attention, etc. Bad things stopping can be a release from a stay, removal of a source of pain or discomfort, etc. Bad things happening (punishments) are obvious, yelling, hitting, jerking on the leash. Good things stopping are a little more subtle. Your dog is having a good time sniffing around in the back yard. You call him to you, snap a lead on him and take him inside. That is a good thing stopping and he may hesitate before coming to you the

next time. Do it often enough and your dog will learn to stop coming when called. Call your dog to you, snap the lead on him and then yell at him or hit him and the next time you call him, he is likely to take off in the opposite direction.

Dog training, like comedy, is dependent on good timing. Dogs live entirely in the moment. For a reward or punishment to be effective, it has to be tied to the behavior. Being off by even a quarter of a second can make a huge difference in the dog's ability to connect the reward with the behavior. That is why we use the clicker. You can carry the clicker in your hand and capture any behavior at the instant it happens. The treat or real reward can come a few seconds later if necessary. This does take some practice to get your clicker skills accurate enough. The other thing it requires is that you pay attention to your dog's behavior. If your timing is poor or if you are not paying attention to your dog, you will not be successful at training him no matter what method you use.

Counting and statistics

If you don't measure how your dog is doing in some quantifiable way, you will not do a good job training and you will quickly lose interest.

Training, sets and sessions, precision, time, rate and the importance of counting. A set is a series of one behavior repeated about ten times. A session is a group of sets and shouldn't be more than about five minutes long. Particularly with a young dog, he will get bored with anything longer. By keeping it short he will be ready and eager every time you get out the clicker. Work on only one behavior per set and no more than two or three behaviors per session. Leave about 20 minutes between sessions. At first, you will need to keep the reward rate high. With a new behavior, you want the dog to be winning every 2 or three seconds. This is 20 to 30 rewards a minute. As he gets better, the rate of reward will drop, but at the beginning of every new trick, it should be very high. Using sets of ten allows you to quickly calculate his success rate. The rules are:

1. 0% to 50% success - the criteria is too high. Ask for less, make it simpler, move to a less distracting place etc. If the success rate is between 50% and 60%, relax your criteria a little bit.
2. Between 60% and 80% you are in the groove. Keep the criteria, distractions etc. at that level until she improves.
3. Over 80% success, you can raise the criteria or increase the distractions until the success rate drops to about 60%.
4. Once you have the criteria as high as you want and the distractions are as intense as you ever expect them to be, and he is getting the behavior precisely correct over 95% of the time, then you name the behavior.

Naming the behavior too early tells her that the level of precision he has reached is good enough. If he is still pretty sloppy at that point then sloppy is what you are going to have and it will be difficult to make further improvement unless you change the cue.

Discussion:

Talking to your dog.

All dogs bite. Those without teeth will try to gum you to death. Since all dogs are armed and dangerous, they have evolved with some extensive and sophisticated signals for calming themselves and each other. Many of these signals can be mimicked by people. Learning to read and use these signals will allow you communicate much more effectively with your dog. I suggest you watch a video that demonstrates a number of these behaviors. There are two that are not mentioned that I want to tell you about first. These are "Shaking it out" and sneezing. The shake out is like a shrug and helps a dog lower its internal tension. I translate the sneeze as "Are we having fun yet?" I see it most when the dog is excited in a good way. Going for a walk, waiting (not patiently) as dinner is prepared, etc. These are used by the dog to calm themselves more than others. You can help your dog calm himself if you can put these and similar behaviors on cue.

Video: Calming Signals - Talking with your dog.

Anxiety.

Some dogs have problems with anxiety. Like with people, there are many drivers. A sudden change at home that puts stress on the entire family. Come on, these guys have been sharing our campfires for 50,000 years. Don't you think they notice when their people are weirding out? Dad getting laid off and the family looking at being homeless – A new job and Mom is gone five out of seven nights – A sick child (or new child) in the family – A new puppy or the loss of an old friend (pet or person) – you name it. Often times the trigger is a behavior loop. The dog is put in a situation it is not equipped to handle. It responds in a way that seems appropriate to it. Keep in mind your dog has a brain the size of a lemon and the aggressive armament to take down prey four times its size. Everyone is freaked out and the response is to reduce the dog's social interactions – fewer trips to the dog park, owner yanking on the leash whenever another person or dog approaches, etc. Use it or lose it, and pretty soon the dog has even fewer social skills and thinks everything is a threat. Ta-Da – an anxious dog.

The tip off is that the dog does not remember new stuff and seems to be slowly forgetting stuff it once knew. It may develop new anxieties (thunder & fireworks) or even separation anxiety. Life can be hell for a dog with severe anxiety problems and it is not the dog's fault. Neither can they fix the problem by themselves. I have had the best fortune with a combination of training and meds. Meds lower the anxiety to the point that the training has a chance to stick. Training teaches the dog to manage its environment and control its own internal state. If everything comes together, you can eventually fade the drugs entirely. Trust me, I hate getting my personality out of a bottle and I seldom recommend it for your dog. However, if your dog needs it, it is cruel to withhold the fix.