

Empathy for Our Dogs

It is important that you try to see things through your dog's perspective and to have compassion and empathy for them. Being in a new home or new environment can be scary and confusing. It is very important to be patient and don't force them into a fearful situation. I hope that you enjoy this excerpt from the book and find this information helpful – To continue reading, check out “The Evolution of Dog Training” by Shannon Coyner on Amazon!

As humans, we often feel some stress when moving or staying in new places, but we have an advantage over dogs. We have verbal language (that other people know most of the time), so we can ask where the restroom is or verbalize a discomfort. Our brains also allow us to plan for the future and read signs to know where we are. A trained dog may have some advantage if they understand things like “sit,” “down,” “come,” “go potty,” but, if the new humans they live with do not use the correct cues (or words the dog understands) they may as well know nothing. In addition, some of our human rules are arbitrary, inconsistent, and change from situation to situation. We are supposed to maintain quiet in one type of building (church or library) but we are loud at others (at bars or at a party). We should greet some people with a hug but with others we should shake their hands. These rules are confusing for humans, so how do we expect dogs to keep up?

Our inability to see things through a dogs perspective causes many people to misinterpret dog behaviors as being aggressive or dominant. I once consulted with a family who thought their dog was becoming aggressive or dominant. The Cocker Spaniel, Joe, attacked another dog who came into his backyard with my client's neighbor. As we discussed the dog coming into Joe's backyard, I learned that the dog was known to Joe because she barked at him when they saw each other on walks. When the neighbor came into the backyard with the dog joe was startled which started the altercation. The other dog was not harmed. After we discussed the event, it was clear that Joe responded similarly to how a human would respond if an unfriendly neighbor snuck into the yard uninvited. People have shot other people for this exact crime.

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1. What they are teaching is not clear.

This mistake can happen in any part of the teaching process; however, the most common place it happens is with the consequence. If you reinforce a behavior too early or too late, the wrong behavior is reinforced and the desired behavior gets ignored.

This mistake can also happen when the cue used closely resembles another cue. Either the words or hand signals are so similar that the dog cannot tell the difference and they will often do one behavior for both cues. This commonly happens when people use a hand signal for “sit” and “down.” If the two cues are too similar, the dog will default to the behavior he prefers.

2. They expect too much too soon.

This is probably this most common problem. I often tell people that their dog cannot go directly from kindergarten to college. They must take all the steps in between. For example, they may begin to teach their dog to sit and then expect that they will be able to stay for five minutes right away. People often expect their dogs to behave perfectly in public the first time they leave the house. Dogs need to learn how to behave in public, just as human children learn to do.

Another behavior that people expect too much too soon is with recall or “come.” In some cases, they will practice a few times in the house, then take the dog to the park for the first time. When they attempt to call the dog, he does not respond because he is too distracted and does not know the cued behavior well enough to do it in that high distraction environment.

3. The motivation is not high enough for the expected skill.

There is often a misunderstanding that dogs should do what we want in order to please us. I am not sure why people think this, since we don't go to work to please our boss. We go to earn money. There are times that we do things to please our partners, spouses, or children, but that is after we have developed a strong relationship, and it is usually something we don't mind doing. There are some things that we teach our dogs that will only require a piece of kibble or another low value treat. If we are teaching a complicated behavior, or if the dog is mildly stressed or distracted, the value of the reinforcement must be higher to keep the dogs attention. If my dog is playing with his dog friends and I want him to come when I call, I need to have a really good reward; otherwise, he will choose fun over my treat.

When I teach the teeter in agility (the piece of equipment that resembles a seesaw), I go very slowly and give a lot of treats. Of all the obstacles in agility, this one tends to cause the most fear because it moves. When I have dogs that are a little afraid of it, I find the highest value treat or toy I can find. When they get on the teeter, they get lots of good things. In some cases, the teeter petrifies some dogs. Once they master it with the high value treats, it becomes a favorite obstacle.

4. They do not practice long enough to master the skill.

No matter what the skill or behavior, if we do not practice, we do not improve. Even Olympic athletes have to practice. Dogs are no different. You get out what you put in. If you spend time training your dog everyday and increase the challenge in incremental steps, he will master the behavior. If you rarely practice and never increase the challenge, the skill will never improve. It really is that simple.

5. They only practice in one place and do not increase the level of distraction while teaching.

This is essentially the same concept as expecting too much too soon. The best way to learn any skill is to first practice when there is little or no distraction. For example, when we learn a new language, we usually start by learning it in a classroom and at home. As we get better, we may begin to practice with friends and family in slightly more distracting environments. Eventually with practice, we can become fluent in language and speak freely and easily in any environment. It does not happen overnight and it requires practice in a variety of different environments.