

Both Ends of the Leash

Behavior Interruptus: Good habits make good dogs-- teach them early

Patricia B. McConnell

It's evening, company is coming, your kids are playing chase games through the kitchen and you just discovered that your dog is busy chewing off the corner of the Oriental rug. Scenarios like this are common, but are rarely covered in dog training books or classes. We trainers like to tell people how to teach dogs to do things, but we don't always do a very good job of explaining how to get dogs not to do something. My five-month old puppy reminds me daily that raising a dog is as much about teaching dogs what not to do as it is the opposite.

Turn Down the Volume

It's worth taking a moment to discuss what not to do when a dog misbehaves, because many of our typical responses aren't very helpful. It seems to be oh-so-human to respond to misbehavior by speaking to the dog in words that mean something to us but not to her. How many of us have said, "Be quiet!" to a barking dog and never stopped to think that – unless you're an English-speaking human – the words "be quiet" are just meaningless noises?

Yelling pointlessly at our dogs sounds foolish, but it's a common response when an animal is doing something we don't like. When our words have no impact, we make things worse by repeating them louder and louder, as though sheer volume will clarify what we are trying to communicate. That's true no matter what kind of animal we're talking to – recently, I watched two men try to disentangle a "cattle jam" by yelling, "Turn around, TURN AROUND!" to a frightened cow. Granted, you can teach a cow to turn around on cue, but it seemed highly doubtful that this particular cow had been the beneficiary of any such training. Remember this



story when you are tempted to yell at your dog, and work on getting into the habit of only using words that mean something to her.

Keep this in mind as well: Don't take the popular advice about "getting dominance over your dog" very seriously. Dogs aren't barking at the window or chasing squirrels or chewing shoes because they don't respect you as the "alpha pack leader." They're barking, chasing and chewing because that's what dogs do, and because they haven't yet had a chance to learn behavior that we consider polite. Our job is to teach them what we want them to do.

Look for Teachable Moments

The first question to ask yourself when your dog is misbehaving is, "What do I want my dog to be doing instead?" You can say "no" until you're blue in the face, but that doesn't give your dog much information. After all, there are a thousand things your dog might be doing wrong, and if you say "no" to one, there are still 999 options left. However, the reality is that there are only a few things that you would like your dog to be doing – so it's a good idea to help him learn what those things are, even when he has other ideas.

Let's take barking at the window as an example. Imagine that you've just settled down to eat your dinner when your dog sees a couple with a stroller walking past your house. He leaps up and launches into vigorous barking and scratching at the window. If you sit at the table and yell "no," you aren't telling your dog anything about what he should be doing instead. Even worse, you are probably adding fuel to the fire by making bark-like noises yourself – what is

your dog to think but that you've joined in festivities and that he was right to bark in the first place?

However, what if you quietly select a tasty morsel from your plate (hey, sometimes you just have to be creative), go to your dog and hold it an inch from his nose? Now you have his attention. If you follow up by luring him away from the window and asking him to sit or lie down, you've just shown him what you do want him to do. By interrupting the problem behavior and then redirecting him to something appropriate, you've turned a problem situation into a "teachable moment." Make a mental note that barking at the window could be a problem, and that you need to proactively teach him a different response when he sees people walk by. Use your trusty treats or toys to reinforce him every time he turns away from the window after seeing something outside, helping him when necessary by luring him away or clapping your hands to get his attention. Eventually, he'll do it all by himself, since he's learned that it's rewarding to turn away from the window when someone walks by.

What if you walk into the room and spot your dog munching on the remote control? This is another situation in which you want to interrupt the behavior and redirect your dog to something appropriate – like the chew toy you just bought for him. This is also a time to teach your dog a cue that means "Nope, please don't do that."

"No" is Just a Noise

There's something seductive about the word "no." It's common for people to say "NO!" to their dog and expect him to understand what it means, even when they'd never expect the equivalent with "sit" or "down." As mentioned previously, the word is often yelled at full volume, and sometimes, truth be told, it does indeed stop the misbehavior. Yelling can scare many dogs into stopping what they were doing, but do you really want a dog who is scared of you? Besides, yelling is no fun, so it's worth taking the time to teach your dog a cue that means "I'm sorry, but what you're about to do is not allowed here" – without having to belt it out at the top of your lungs.

First, decide as a group what word or sound you and your family are going to use, and do your best to be consistent when you use it – and work on saying it in a quiet but low-pitched voice. The word "no" is out of favor with many trainers, probably because it is so

often abused, but it is a fine choice if that's what comes most naturally. Other common cues are "Wrong," "Uh uh" and "Hey!"

Armed with your handy treats, set your dog up to do something inappropriate, like chew on your shoes. Select an item that will be of some interest but that's only mildly attractive to a dog – no fair putting down a bowl of chicken. Set the article on the ground, and say "no" as your dog heads toward it (I'll use "no" for convenience in the rest of this section). Use a low, quiet voice, but try to have the sound come out of your mouth as fast as it can. You want to startle your dog with a surprising sound, not bowl him over with a loud noise, so keep the volume moderate. If your dog stops moving away from the item in response to your voice, immediately praise him and then give him a treat. If he doesn't, move the treat to his nose and lure him away. Praise as his head turns, and give him a treat. Then back up one step and give him a chance to sniff the article again. If he turns back to the forbidden item, repeat "no" doing all you can to say it before he makes contact. Respond as before, praising and treating if he stops himself, helping him away if he doesn't.

Your dog, bless his furry little heart, will give you lots of opportunities to practice this, whether it's chewing on the table leg, squatting to urinate on the rug or chasing the cat up the stairs. The key to making this work is to say the cue as fast as you can, and then be ready – always, always ready! – to make him happy he listened to you. It helps to match the reinforcement with what he was about to do. If he was about to chase the cat, reinforce him by letting him chase you or a ball. If he wanted to chew on your new shoes, give him an appropriate chew toy.

Good Habits Make Good Dogs

Here's one last comment about preventing dogs from getting themselves (and us) into trouble. I touched on it earlier, but it bears repeating because it's so important. Good dogs are dogs who were taught good habits early in life, and who were prevented (as much as possible) from learning bad habits. Of course, habits can be changed, but we all know it's not as easy as starting from scratch. You'll be happiest with your dog if you are proactive about teaching good habits and preventing problematic ones. This advice sounds so simplistic it almost

seems unnecessary, but it takes thought and attention on our part to be one step ahead of our dogs.

If your pup runs to the front window and barks every time he sees someone walk by, teach him a different response (or even better, don't wait for the first bark!). If you have a dog nicknamed "the mouth with paws," don't wait for him to grab your Italian shoes out of the closet. Prevent problems by being obsessive about keeping your personal items off the floor and shutting doors. This may sound obvious, but it takes a lot of energy to be proactive rather than reactive, and it's probably the biggest difference between professional trainers and novices. So give your dog plenty of chew toys, redirect him to what's appropriate and, for your own sake, recite daily "this too shall pass, this too shall pass." It will. And all too soon you'll be wondering where the years went, and you'll forget all the work it took to raise your dog to be a good citizen – until you get another one.

Patricia B. McConnell, PhD, is an animal behaviorist and ethologist and an adjunct professor in Zoology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, as well as the author of numerous books on behavior and training.

This column was originally printed in The Bark Magazine, Issue No. 42, Jan-Feb 2007. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission.