

Lesson Plan: “the unintentional reinforcement of inappropriate behavior”

I’m often asked “ how long will it take for my dog to stop.....(fill in the blank)”. A very difficult question to answer. We as humans unintentionally reinforce inappropriate behavior. Unclear communication, body language and punishment can actually give value to the behaviors you are trying to eliminate.

Unclear communication can fall into the category of not being consistent with the behavior you are asking the dog to offer. Consolidate the words you use. A common discrepancy I come in contact with is the use of the down cue. Many humans say down when the dog jumps. The down behavior in much of basic obedience training is for the dog to place their body on the floor or ground.

Our body language can many times betray our feelings. Myself included, many times I catch myself holding a leash with what I call the “death grip”. My body language is telling the dog I am not confident in handling the dog. All that negative energy contained in the death grip is traveling down the leash to the dog and can cause you stress in your dog.

When You say “NO” to your dog what behavior are you asking for?? We humans use “NO” frequently as a punishment to stop unwanted behaviors. The premise stems from the theory of using a negative punishment by removing something the dog desires (a resource) when the dog displays unwanted behavior. I use the negative punishment theory but recommend not to say “NO” until the dog understands the difference from appropriate behaviors to offer. Give the dog behaviors to offer. Once the dog has known behaviors we can redirect the dog without punishment to a positive behavior so the dog can understand that one behavior is reward and not the other.

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Brenda Aloff, 2002, Funcraft, Inc Collierville TN
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