

How Dogs Learn

Dogs have now been recognized as sentient beings and their behaviour is often driven by their emotional state along with biological urges. Just like humans they all learn slightly differently and are motivated by different things, however learning theory can be applied to all.

One of the most important things to remember is your dog does not know what you have not taught them. The word 'no' often does not mean anything to your dog as there is no specific behaviour linked to it. They may have learnt a cue like 'sit' under specific circumstances but may not have generalized that cue. Their motivation and your motivation may also not be the same. This does not make them 'stubborn' or 'dominate', it makes them a living being.

That term force free means that you endeavor to not use force or intimidation in training. Dogs learn mainly through associations. They build associations all the time, for example they may associate the lead with going for a walk. They then form an emotional association with the lead, the owner holding up the lead makes them feel excited. We can shape behaviour with associations too. If the dog does something we like and we give them a treat, they associate that action with treats and will repeat the behaviour. Behaviour that is reinforced will be repeated. Often people think that this means we are bribing the dog, if you reward after the behaviour occurs then it's not bribery, it's reinforcement. Just like you thank someone for doing something for you or you get paid for going to work. However sometimes we may need to use bribery and that's ok to. Dogs are not born knowing our language and we are extremely inconsistent with the information we give them.



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They can also form bad associations. The vet clinic is often associated with the pain of a needle and creates the emotion of fear.

There are many reasons to not use pain or intimidation when training, however one of the main reasons is that it is easy for dogs to form the wrong associations. If the puppy is excited to see you and jumps up, if you knee that puppy in the chest or shout no, then the puppy may not build the association of their jumping with the punishment, rather your presence. This is likely to reduce their trust in people. In traditional dog training, threat was often used to motivate “don’t jump or else” the or else could be physical punishment or something like a spray bottle. Often people will say “I just have to show the dog the spray bottle and he’ll stop barking” this is because they have already built a scary association with that bottle and now are essentially threatening the dog by showing it to them. Finally, punishing a dog does not teach them what you want them to do, rather it just suppresses behaviour. This can cause frustration, confusion and even anxiety. For example, if you have a dog who barks at the neighbours, they may be performing a strong biological behaviour, protecting their territory. If you put a spray collar on that dog, the barking is likely to reduce but the urge to perform the behaviour does not. This will cause the dog to potentially shut down or show onward signs of anxiety.

But Who Is Alpha? No one is. That’s because domesticated dogs don’t have an alpha. The alpha wolf theory was actually disproved several decades ago (if you are interested in knowing why, google David Mech alpha wolf theory). However the term continues to linger in popular culture and has often resulted in dogs being treated very badly. Dogs are also not wolves, they have been domesticated for about 17 000 years and have been genetically designed to live and work with people. The term ‘dominance’ is also very misunderstood. In ethology, a display of dominance is actually a ritualized display designed to keep the peace. We also already dictate so much of their lives. We eat what we feed them, walk where we walk them and sleep where we decide. Dogs may become assertive in different situations, but again this is not dominance, neither is rough play, the dog walking in front of you one pup jumping on another. Rather than thinking of yourself as the ‘pack leader’ think of yourself as the team coach. You need to help teach your pup the rules but also respect your pup’s needs. Doing so will lead to a much better relationship with your dog than if you constantly focused on exerting power.

