

Attention Seeking

Attention seeking behaviours are not bad!

We want our dogs to want attention! A dog who values your attention is more likely to come when called, tolerate husbandry and is usually easier to train. Behaviours such as barking, jumping and mouthing are natural behaviours that dogs do as forms of communication. Sometimes they are to ask for attention, sometimes to express other needs.

If your dog is exhibiting attention seeking behaviours, rather than trying to suppress these behaviours, teach different forms of communication. This requires you to be very quick in reinforcing wanted behaviours or specifically teaching a behaviour and asking for it when you think your dog wants attention. These behaviours may be eye contact, resting their chin on you or something nearby, bringing you a toy or an item, pawing at you or sitting. Look at what your dog does naturally as well. Initially if your dog communicates through one of these behaviours, you must reinforce it. If you don't they are likely to resort to behaviours such as jumping.

Over time, if you cannot give them attention right at that point in time, you can teach them a 'not now' cue. To do this, pick a cue (I use "that'll do"), when you patting them, give a hand signal such as empty palms and then turn your head and shoulders away from your dog. This action replicates one dog cutting off social interaction with another (not that our dogs think we are dogs!). This cue is initially difficult for dogs to learn as we are not reinforcing anything, so you need to be very consistent. If you give the cue and your dog continues to ask for attention, you may need to leave the area or start a boring activity that quite obviously does not involve your dog. Do not try to teach this cue until the dog has very much established a new attention seeking behaviour. Remember that jumping, barking and mouthing do not always mean "I want attention". For example many dogs jump when they are anxious or scared, remember to look at the whole picture!

Finally, do remember that dogs are often highly social creatures. There may be times that you do not feel like giving attention but they actually need it.

