

Clear Communication and Education

On the whole, we humans do not spend nearly enough time teaching our dogs how to behave in a socially acceptable manner. Think of how much time we spend teaching our children - who are mentally capable of learning human rules and conventions and compare this to how much time we spend teaching our dogs! And yet... what are our expectations of these animals? I would suggest that most of the time we are being somewhat unrealistic.

So how can we communicate to our dogs that we don't like what they are doing?

The first thing we need is the dogs' trust and respect, i.e. trust that you are not going to cause any pain or suffering, and trust that you are going to allow to it **AVOID** your anger.

When my dogs are misbehaving and I catch them in the act of doing so, I initially yell their names at the top of my voice, and tell them "quit it now". If they don't stop, I grab hold of their collars and calmly restrain them until they calm down. I emphasize the word "calmly" because I am not battling, just restraining. Once they lower their heads and relax then I let go and take control of the situation by giving them something else to do, or else teach them what else I would rather have them do. If this fails, they are sent to their beds until they cool down. However, as soon as they are behaving in a manner that I find acceptable, I really let them know how **VERY PLEASED I AM**. Thereby offering strong, clear signals as to what it is that makes me happy and what they can do to alter their behaviour in future.

Say for example, Lotte and Nalle are chasing around the sitting room being very boisterous and bumping into things, perhaps knocking a few ornaments over. This is a classic situation of where I will interrupt their play session, take hold of them with a very stern word and then wait for them to calm down. I may well then send them off to their beds for a while. But once they start behaving well I will tell them so e.g. "that's much better, now this is what I call being good". At which point I do make a point of fussing and talking to them.

Another example: Let's assume they were jumping all over someone and making a nuisance of themselves. In this instance I would order them to sit. If they failed to respond, I would attach their leads and stand on the leads until they settled themselves, again when they respond positively, I praise and reward their actions.

Occasionally, some dogs have become so hyped up, that it is necessary to get right in there with them, and this is where I might well shout at the top of my voice as I restrain them by collar, literally to break through the trance-like state the dog has whipped itself into. However, the moment the dog shows signs of noticing me, I start to release my hold, and then change my body posture and facial expressions in order that we can start communicating in a more reasonable fashion.

This type of reprimanding can be quite distressing for some dogs, so I leave major "bawls-outs" for very urgent situations, or for occasions when I am so angry that I wish to convey something very specific which needs an instant response. This way, my dogs really do know when they have overstepped the mark. However, if I were to constantly discipline my dogs in this manner, they would never begin to understand when they had really overstepped the mark. So please bear in mind, dogs are intelligent and sensitive animals, which need to be given time to LEARN what the rules are. It is no good shouting and creating if the dog has NO IDEA of what you are trying to get it to do. You will only be creating an atmosphere of fear.

I have lost count of how many times people have said to me "I have told the dog NO, but it still carries on doing what I tell it not to", so I usually ask "so what happens next?" and the answer comes back "well I told it NO again, but it still keeps on doing it", so again I ask "so what happens next?" By this time I usually get the "are you totally stupid?" look. But what I am hoping for is that the owner will tell me something like: "well, I understood the dog needed something to chew on as opposed to my favourite armchair, so I GAVE IT SOMETHING ELSE to chew on". If I get an answer like this I am over the moon!

It is no good telling your dog NO! NO because the dog ends up thinking it's name is NO. If you are trying to interrupt an unwanted behaviour SHOW the dog what you would rather it be doing instead, and when it does PRAISE IT, REWARD IT AND SHOWER IT WITH LOVE, KISSES AND CUDDLES. This way the dog will come to understand what you would like.

Punishing The Offence After The Act Has Occurred

This is another devastating quandary dogs find themselves in. Dogs do not have the mental capacity of reasoning backwards in time. If the dog has chewed up your best slippers and strewn the litterbin across the floor whilst you were out, this was probably done within minutes of your leaving home. So there is absolutely no point in going ballistic when you arrive home. All you can do is clear up the mess. Again, many people say "it knew it had done wrong the moment I walked through the door" (think back to the calming signals and what lowering of the head means). Yes the dog will lower its head, because it has probably learnt that the combination of the mess on the floor, plus your arrival home equals bad news, not guilt, shame and an apology that it will not happen again in future. If you are unconvinced by this, try placing some previously shredded rubbish on the floor, and then go out and come back into the room again. You will see the dog squirm, but you were the one who placed the rubbish on the floor so how could the dog be guilty?

If you are experiencing problems with your dog being destructive in your absence, there are reasons for this behaviour that cannot be covered fully during this course. Please telephone me for further advice, because this is a problem that can be dealt with quite effectively.