The Happy Dog Training Academy

Common mistakes and avoid them

**Are You Making Mistakes?**

**Ten common mistakes and how to avoid them**

Dogs have been part of our lives for 10,000 years; the last 2,000 we have introduced dogs to assist us in day to day living. So, you would think that training a dog would be a natural process for humans. But, too often, we make honest errors in training that result in nagging misbehaviours and strained relations. Sometimes repeating the same training but expecting different results. The errors can cost owners (and dogs) years of frustration, in some cases it cost the dogs much more including euthanasia. I’ve listed ten biggest training mistakes I see owners make and offer alternatives to improve your chances. Note that these are related to training techniques only, and not to other important areas such as socialization, enrichment, or exercise.

1. **You don’t train your dog often enough**

A lot of us make a simple mistake of not training our dog enough, we teach the basic behaviours and routines to our new dogs. As soon as the dog has the basic’s we often allow our dogs to go on “auto-pilot.” Often a dog won’t even respond. This degradation is simply a function of a lack of practice, if you play sports once a year, you first will not get better, what is worse if you practice for months to play a sport, then only play once a year you only go backwards.

Keep your dog’s known behaviours sharp by working them randomly and regularly, several times each day. Sit for dinner, wait at doors, down at the dog park, be spontaneous and unpredictable. Then each month, teach a new behaviour, a trick will do to keep your dog’s mind and motivation up. The larger your pet’s repertoire of behaviours, the smarter he or she gets, and the more important you become to them.

1. **You repeat commands**

There are many challenging dogs, one thing I see more often than you think, is repeating the command. The owner has taught a behaviour such as sit, but, due to distractions, bad technique, or confusion on the dog’s part, the pet fails to respond. The owner asks repeatedly until, after the sixth or seventh attempt, the dog half-heartedly sits. This stalling becomes a learnt behaviour, one that’s hard to break.

This often occurs with behaviours that haven’t been fully proofed, or with one the dog doesn’t particularly like to perform. Headstrong dogs, for instance, hate to lie down, as it is a submissive action, dogs also resist lying down, a position they might deem too unsafe.

When I teach the sit, I do so as if it’s a fun trick. I treat reward at first, lots of praise then work it in other locations, reducing treat rewards along the way while increasing praise. I make sitting, lying down, or coming when called the greatest things to do. So often in the dog park, I see owners calling their dogs, once the dog returns not even acknowledging the dog for coming.

Once you are sure a dog knows a behaviour, ask only once. If you are ignored, it’s either because you haven’t taught it properly, or the dog is distracted or simply rebellious. Go back to basics and re-teach, avoiding the mistake of asking multiple times, or of making the behaviour seem dreary or unbeneficial.

One other tip; after asking once without response, wait a moment, while looking your dog square in the eye and moving in a bit closer. Often this will be enough to get the dog to comply. Then praise, the trick is lots of praise, treats, don’t be mean, with your rewards.

**3. Your training sessions run too long or too short**

Teaching new behaviours to a dog is a process of evolution, not revolution. The key is in knowing that it’s usually going to take numerous sessions to perfect a new behaviour.

Time spent on a training session should reflect some positive result; as soon as you attain some obvious level of success, reward, then quit. Don’t carry on and on, as you’ll likely bore the dog, and actually condition it to become disinterested in the new behaviour. Likewise, don’t end a session until some evidence of success is shown, even if it’s a moment of focus or an attempt by the dog to try to perform. Remember that 2 x 5-minute sessions in a day trump one ten-minute session every day.

**4. Your dog’s obedience behaviours are not generalized to varying conditions**

If you teach Fly to sit, in the quiet of your family room only, that’s the only place he will reliably sit. It’s a mistake that many owners make, failing to generalize the behaviour in different areas with varying conditions and levels of distraction will only ensure spotty obedience at best. We always teach first in the house, where there are few distractions, then move the behaviour into the garden where there are more distractions, and finally when your dog has it mastered, we can move it to areas outside the home, with varying degrees of distractions.

To generalize a behaviour, first teach it at home with no distractions. Then, gradually increase distractions: turn the television on or have another person sit nearby. Once that’s perfected, move out into the yard. Then add another person or dog. Gradually move on to busier environments until the dog will perform consistently, even on the corner of a busy city street. Only then will the behaviour be “proofed.” This generalizing is especially vital when teaching the recall command, a behaviour that might one day save your dog’s life.

**5. You rely too much on treats and not enough on praise, esteem, and celebrity**

Treats are a great way to initiate a behaviour or to reinforce that behaviour intermittently later on. But liberal use of treats can often work against you. There can develop in the dog’s mind such a fixation on food that the desired behaviour itself becomes compromised and focus on the owner diffused. Think of it: you’ll rarely see hunting, agility, Frisbee, or law enforcement dogs being offered food rewards during training or job performance. Why? Because it would break focus and interfere with actual performance. Instead, other muses are found, including praise and, perhaps, brief play with a favourite toy. Most of all, reward for these dogs comes from the joy of the job itself.

Initiate new behaviours with treats. But once Fido learns the behaviour, replace treats with praise, play, toy interludes, or whatever else he likes. Remember that unpredictable treat rewards work to sharpen a behaviour, while frequent, expected rewards slow performance and focus. Also, understand that you are a reward as well, you are responding happily to something your dog has done will work better than a treat, and have the added effect of upping your “celebrity status” with your dog.

**6. You use too much emotion**

Excessive emotion can put the brakes on Fluff’s ability to learn. Train with force, anger, or irritation and you’ll intimidate her and turn training sessions into inquisitions. Likewise, train with hyperbolic energy, piercing squeals of delight, and over-the-top displays of forced elation, and you will stoke her energy levels far beyond what is needed to focus and learn.

I tell students to adopt a sense of “calm indifference” a demeanour suggesting competence, and a sense of easy authority. A laid-back, loving, mentoring kind of energy that calms a dog, and fills it with confidence. If your dog goofs up, instead of flying off the handle, back off, and try again. Likewise, if she gets something right, instead of erupting with shrills, just calmly praise her, smile, then move on. She will gradually imprint on this relaxed attitude and reflect it.

**7. You are reactive, not proactive**

Dog training is a lot like the beautiful martial art of Tai Chi, with equal parts physical and philosophical. It takes timing, technique, and stamina, as well as a devotion to understanding the canine mind. It is not a skill that can be learned by watching one half-hour television show or from reading a few books, or a crash course on the internet. It takes time, not only time and devotion, but patience. Training a dog becomes very easy, when you take your time and think about what you’re looking to achieve. Then break it down into it smallest parts and train each part, putting them together in the end. Not only can you put the individual parts together but your able to add one exercise to another.

As a result, many dog owners have not yet mastered the timing and insight needed to train as capably as they might like. Like someone playing chess for the first time, they react to their opponent’s moves instead of planning their own.

When you simply react to your dog’s misbehaviours, you lose the opportunity to teach. Instead, practice your technique, anticipate his reactions ahead of time, becoming more proactive in the process. For example, if trying to quell a barking issue, instead of waiting for the barks to start, catch your dog, right before his brain says “bark,” and distract into some other, more acceptable, behaviour. Know that whatever stimulus is causing the barking needs to be either eliminated or redefined as a “good thing” in the dog’s head. This takes experience and a proactive role on your part.

**8. You are inconsistent**

Dogs need to feel that their mentors and providers are consistent in behaviour and in rule setting. If you vary training technique too much, especially in the beginning, you’ll diminish your dog’s ability to learn. For instance, if one day you stay patient with a stubborn dog, but the next day lose your cool, she won’t be able to predict how you’ll react at any given moment. This breaks confidence and trust. Instead, stick to a consistent methodology and be unswerving regarding what is suitable behaviour. For instance, if Fluffy isn’t allowed on the bed, but you let it happen two times out of ten, that’s inconsistent. Set rules and stick to them.

**9. You lack confidence**

Loss of confidence is a weakness, and I think as a natural predator, dogs can sense it instinctively. It’s one reason why I feel frightened people get bitten more often than calmer individuals. Now I’m not saying you should put yourself in harm’s way, if you feel a dog is aggressive or if your pet shows the first signs of aggression, seek professional advice.

Show a lack of confidence and Fido will exploit it. That’s not a condemnation of your pet, it’s just a dog’s nature. To avoid this, simply work him more and attain some training successes. Attending a class with him can work wonders to increase your confidence, as can you spending time with other dogs. Try trading dogs with a friend every so often for the different experience. Take your dog into different venues and push yourself and your dog to learn more. Practice!

**10. You don’t train to the individual dog**

Every dog has a distinct personality and behavioural profile. Over the last 2000 years we have bread dogs to perform different things. Though breed helps determine this, the individual dog’s character must be understood before training can succeed. As the trainer, you must determine what methods will work best with your dog.

For example, most retrievers are very sociable and can handle lots of people or dogs around them. But try this with a Chow Chow or Border Collie, and you may be in for a surprise. Likewise, a dog with a high food drive will respond to treats, while a dog with a low food drive may require a different form of training, toys etc. A shy dog will fare poorly with a robust training technique, whereas an exuberant dog might not even hear the gentle appeals coming from a trainer with a less hardy style. Think timid Toy Poodle versus rowdy Rottweiler.

If you have a shy dog, plan on showing a saint’s patience. Train peacefully, with little distractions at first. Train to the dog’s limitations, but plan to gradually sneak in social situations to desensitize and build confidence. If your dog is a big, bulldozing lummox, be just as big, just as hearty. Know that this dog can be challenged more than that timid dog. And know that, because of its size and strength, you simply must achieve control over it, especially in social situations. For dogs in between, reason out a training strategy based upon personality, size, age, energy, breed, and history.

If you stick to these basic guidelines, you’ll slowly redefine yourself as the resident trainer, and not just your dog’s concierge. Practice, succeed, be confident, and have fun with your protégé.