The Happy Dog Training Academy

General Behaviour

**"BUT HE KNOWS WHAT HE'S SUPPOSED TO DO!" HE CAN DO IT AT HOME,**

Probably two most common phrases dog trainers hear.

"He knows to sit when I stop."  
"He knows not to jump up at people."  
"He knows his name."  
"He passed a Training Course, so he knows what to do."

This blog is going to be focused on the reasons why a good dog trainer will ask "does he really know?" We will not be focusing on fixing any specific behaviour or training problems, the goal is that you look at your training techniques and see if there are any holes we hopefully can fill today!

**OVERSHADOWING**

One of the first things that stands out when evaluating a problem of "he doesn't listen" is whether or not the dog ever properly learnt the verbal cue.

Dogs don't speak our language, but they are incredibly adept at reading and interpreting body language and following physical prompts. Because of the language barrier, if your dog is not paying attention when you add your verbal cue, because you are also gesturing the 'sit' motion at the same time, you may think your dog knows the word "sit," when they have actually never paid attention to it the entire time you've been training. In short, the dog is only following the gesturing.

*In summary:  
1. Adding the verbal cue does not occur until the dog has been condition to the physical cue.  
2. The verbal cue PRECEDES the physical prompt.  
3. One verbal cue is associated with one behaviour.  
4. The verbal cue must be enforced and then reinforced.   
5. If the dog is not listening, instead of assuming disobedience, consider that it may not understand what you are trying to communicate.*

Overshadowing can occur during any physical prompt, including, but not limited to luring, leash pressure etc. So, next time your dog is sitting in front of you, cocking their head to the side trying to interpret the foreign language, and you are getting frustrated that they will not just lay down when you say 'down', **I challenge you to reintroduce the verbal cue, this time keeping in mind the concept of overshadowing**! I have a feeling you will like what you see.

**GENERALIZATION**  
The learning skill necessary to perform any behaviour anywhere at any time without coercion or bribery. It is the key to behaviour fluency, an important factor in behaviour confidence, and something that takes time and practice.

It's easy to spot a dog whose behaviour has not been generalized, you will see their handlers physically manoeuvre them into a position, repeating the command over and over again, or shove food in the dogs' face in a vain attempt to bribe the dog into compliance. The latter results in a dog who learns to ignore you and your attempts at 'encouragement, and the former results in unfair punishment.

To avoid these pitfalls, we must consider three of the main factors of learning generalization: Age, Environment, Emotion.

**AGE**

Dogs are not born knowing everything about being dogs, they have only learnt what their mother has taught them, this is how to begin to live in a dog’s world, and not how to live in a human world. It is critical that when we design training plans that we keep in mind the age of the dog in question. Generalization, by its very nature, must take place over a period of time. We cannot expect a 4-month-old puppy to have the same experiences as a 4-year-old dog, and we cannot always expose young dogs to the same experiences as older dogs due to their physical and psychological development.

Learning takes time, and **puppies are not just small dogs**. Give puppies the time they need to learn and grow and experience the world. Allow generalization to occur naturally and at the speed at which the puppy is comfortable. At the same time, acknowledge that mature dogs you may have rescued may have varied histories, even if you are told things from the rescue establishment or previous owners, sadly people unlike our dogs do not always tell the truth in respects of the dog’s history. Their path to generalization in those respects may vary greatly than if you were newly introducing a puppy.

**ENVIRONMENT**

A 'sit' in the living room is different than a 'sit' in the kitchen and is different than a 'sit' in the backyard. A 'sit' on the floor is different than a 'sit' on the couch. Also, the 'sit' in an obedience class is different than a 'sit' at an obedience trial.

A dog doing agility in your backyard is different than doing agility in a competitive ring. A dog playing flyball in your training building is different than playing at a tournament. A dog catching a disc in the park is different than catching a disc on a trial field.

Dogs learn their abilities to perform, and everything around them plays a part in their learning process. This can only be done with time and careful consideration to the context under which the dog is learning the behaviour. If your dog can do an exercise in the house or garden but is unable to perform the exercise when out on a walk in the park. You should consider that you have not reinforced the exercise enough.

**EMOTION**

The way a dog feels about something (your emotions, the environment, a specific person, a noise, etc.) can directly affect the dog's ability to perform a behaviour. The veterinarian's office is the easiest example of this. If a dog is fearful in a situation, you may notice they lack compliance of many behaviours they "should know". Does your dog easily stand for an exam in the home but cannot when actually examined by the vet? Can your dog hold a 2-minute sit stay or a 5-minute down stay but is barely keeping its butt on the ground as it trembles in the waiting room? Is your dog an angel on leash on the street but straining on the end to flee the hospital as soon as it enters?

These behaviours are not disobedience, as many may believe. These behaviours, are a lack of compliance, is due to adrenaline, fear, and a shift in what is or is not reinforced in the given situation.

We see emotion creep into many behaviours that have not been fully generalized on an emotional level, I have seen dog’s that can work to the top level of obedience in a training class, but struggle when facing the obedience ring in a show. Even positive, happy emotions can lead to working disasters if you have not fully reinforced the behaviour among all emotional states.

BEFORE YOU BLAME THE DOG FOR NON-COMPLIANCE, THINK, "HAVE I SHOWN HIM THIS PICTURE BEFORE".

If the answer is no, take a step back and prepare the dog for the context.

**INEFFECTIVE PRESSURE**

The overuse of ineffective pressure in your training can and does have detrimental effects to your dog's clarity of behaviour and, potentially, your relationship. Ineffective pressure is typically, negative reinforcement or positive punishment without the dog having a clear understanding of how to avoid the pressure.

At the very root of our training is the concept of operant learning, that the dog understands that its behaviours have consequences, that their behaviour determines the outcome. Ineffective pressure can develop a psychological state in which the dog has given up trying, because its behaviour no longer seems to affect the outcome. In training psychology, we refer to these dogs as "shut-down dog’s", they are no longer making any attempt to behave in any way since any behaviour seems to have a punishing consequence. They appear sullen and depressed, they do not appear to try to learn new things, and, more than anything, they seem disconnected from their handler. A shut-down dog is neither well-trained nor behaviourally sound. These dogs will need a handler or owner who has knowledge in training, in order to teach the dog even the basic of commands.

Ineffective pressure may also develop into the opposite problem, into a dog who, no matter how much pressure is applied, does not yield. If you have to keep applying more and more pressure trying to alter a behaviour, it just becomes ineffective. In some cases, the more pressure you apply it can develop into aggressive behaviour.

**DEMOTIVATING MOTIVATORS**

Your dog is sniffing the ground instead of walking nicely on the lead with you. You shove a hot dog in its face. It may eat the hot dog, it may even wait for another, until, eventually, the hot dog bribe is no longer worth it, and it goes back to sniffing.

Your dog runs away when you call it, in from outside or at the park, that is, until you shake the bag of cookies. Then he runs back to you, however if there is No cookies, there is no recall. And if you try to trick the dog and leash them without a cookie, well, there goes another hour of your life waiting for your dog to exhaust themselves enough to come back on their own. The bribe and the trick taught the dog you're not worth it and you can't be trusted.

We can go on and on, but I'm sure you're already coming up with your own household 'case studies' of bribery. It's easy to fall into the pattern of bribery. It seems easier. You don't actually have to teach anything; you just need access to the bribe and hay presto; the dog does what you want it to do. But like with any bribe, eventually you're going to have to up the ante. Eventually you will still be back to where you were. The use of treats in training are only there to teach, and to reinforce the exercise. It should never be a bribe. People that have been bribing their dogs often find they are constantly trying to find better and better treats or better and better toys.

IN REALITY, THERE WILL NEVER BE A GOOD ENOUGH BRIBE. It is just the nature of bribery.

**THE TRUTH IS THIS, IF YOUR DOG STOPS LISTENING, AS SOON AS YOU DROP THE LEASH, TAKE OFF THE COLLAR, OR RUN OUT OF TREATS, YOU HAVE BEEN BRIBING YOUR DOG INTO COMPLIANCE.**

**UNREASONABLE EXPECTATIONS**

It should go without saying dogs are not, in fact, robots. They are living, breathing sentient creatures with their own feelings, emotions, and thoughts. While we have developed and domesticated them into the most helpful, inherently human-loving species on the planet, **they are still autonomous animals, and we must keep our expectations realistic**.

Some important things never to expect from your dog.

1. Total and complete compliance for every behaviour all the time no matter what.
2. Never expect your dog to perform an exercise without mistakes.
3. Your dog will never have full understanding of consequences (good and bad).
4. A puppy to act like an adult.
5. A dog to never have any fears or insecurities.

This summarizes everything we have talked about here. Just because a child, can add numbers this doesn't mean they can perform calculus. Sure, they're both maths, but one is a far more complex and generalized form of the other. If your dog is still training an exercise, don't take it off the lead at the park and expect it to come back. Don't walk it through the city centre and expect perfect lead behaviour. Don't enter an obedience competition and expect to win.

BE REASONABLE WITH YOUR EXPECTATIONS. TO DO THIS, **YOU MUST BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF**.

Have you put in the work? That's what it really comes down to. Did you do what you needed to do to ensure total, complete understanding from the dog, and have you formed a relationship with your dog that ensures consistent compliance without force or bribery? Of course, we all love to give our pets a treat from time to time. But over doing the treats in training allows your dog to become more reliant on treats than on the direction. The best way to ensure your dog does not become reliant on treats, begin with a treat every time you are rewarding the effort. Once the dog has a better understanding of the exercise you are training, you can at this point drop the treats, reducing them down to every now and again.