

10 Tips for dealing with problem behaviors

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If your dog has certain behaviors you want to change, here are 10 tips for dealing with and changing any unwanted behaviors.

Prevent rehearsal

Each time the dog does the unwanted behavior, the “pathway” in the brain to that behavior gets used and something like “muscle memory” is established. These things make the behavior a more likely option the dog will turn to when presented with similar situations in the future. Not all behaviors can be prevented completely, but recognizing what triggers the unwanted behavior will help you prevent that situation from occurring. You can control your dog’s access to his behavior triggers using the leash, crate, baby gates, avoidance, etc.

Train a substitute behavior

If the dog is not doing the undesirable behavior, he is doing something else. If he’s being quiet, he’s not barking. If his feet are all on the floor, he’s not jumping. When a behavior gets a reward (either from you, the environment or the dog himself) it will be repeated. You need to be sure that it’s the desirable alternative that gets the reward and attention from you. Think about what you want the dog TO DO rather than what you want to stop. Try to get the dog to do the desired behavior in place of the unwanted one. Be sure to reward heavily for the desired behavior, especially if the dog chooses that behavior on his own.

Understand normal dog behavior

Often, a behavior people don’t like is perfectly normal for a dog to do (or for the breed of dog to do.) In some cases, such as chewing, it’s a behavior the dog NEEDS to do. By giving the dog an appropriate outlet for these natural behaviors, the dog will be much happier and more relaxed. You can use these highly desired behaviors as a reward for when the dog does something you like. If your puppy is chewing on furniture (then you failed the prevention step) but you can ask the pup to sit and then reward that desired behavior with a bone he’s allowed to chew on. Often supervision and redirecting the dog to an appropriate outlet is the best solution for natural dog behaviors.

Be consistent

Dogs learn much faster when the rules remain the same. If you sometimes got a pay check for going to work and sometimes got it for staying home, but the rules about which was which weren’t clear, you would have some stress and confusion. People do this to their dogs all the time! Jumping up is OK unless I’m wearing nice clothes or your feet are dirty. Barking is ok unless the neighbors have been complaining or a sleeping baby is visiting. Sometimes it’s ok to get on the couch, sometimes it’s not. The problem is compounded when more than one person routinely interacts with the dog. Make sure all family members understand and enforce the same rules. Dogs are often willing to follow the rules when the rules are clear and consistent.

N.I.L.I.F.

The “Nothing In Life Is Free” program, when implemented in a reasonable manner, can greatly help increase the odds of good behavior. When the dog learns that the way to get what he wants is by doing something you like, your dog will start doing what you like more often. This program also helps teach the dog the concept of self-control. If mugging you for food works, why should he sit politely during meals? If pulling on the leash works, why should he try to keep the leash loose? But, if the dog has to sit before he gets a treat and has to keep the leash loose before you are willing to move a single step, he has more reason to try self-control. This program goes hand in hand with helping the dog toward an acceptable behavior and then rewarding that behavior with something the dog wants.

Look for the good

We are a punishing species. It is a proven fact that when a person uses punishment and it gets results, the use of punishment is more likely. However, the same can be said of using rewarding methods. If you are watching for behaviors you can reward (& you reward them) those behaviors will become more frequent. This works better than always looking for what the dog is doing wrong so you can yell or jerk on the leash. The punishment method will cause a dog to hide the behavior from you. The reward method will cause the dog to bond with you because he wants to figure out what you want him to do (so he can get what he wants.) For some complex behaviors, you might need to gradually “shape” the behavior of the dog to get it closer and closer to the desired behavior. You can do this by timing your rewards in a way that keeps the dog trying and moving toward the desired behavior.

Be active

Most dogs do not get the exercise they require. Many are over weight and bored out of their minds. By keeping their mind and body active, the dog will have less time to get himself into trouble by creating his own fun games- like let’s see how many springs are inside the bed. This troop website has many suggestions for keeping dogs busy both with and without the owner present. Just visit the [games page](#).

Don’t mix signals

As humans, we communicate primarily with words. Dogs, however, are best at reading non-verbal signals like body language and tone of voice. We also tend to use our words in a confusing way- saying “down” when we mean “get off” and repeating the cue so fast it becomes a new cue (“sit, sit, sit”.) Now the dog waits to hear “sit-sit-sit” before he responds. Our message and tone can be confusing too. Saying “come here!” in a ruff and growly voice does not indicate to the dog that going toward you will be safe. Dog’s are masters at reading our body language. Even subtle changes like breathing patterns and raised eye brows are often noticed by dogs. Be aware of what you are saying with your tone and body to be sure it’s not confusing the dog. If your dog is not correctly responding to what you ask, check to make sure your body language and tone aren’t asking for something different (or indicating a bad mood that could make the dog hesitant to respond.)

Train, train, train

Dogs do not come with “good behavior” naturally. In fact, most behavior that DOES come naturally to a dog is in direct contradiction with what we want. By looking for and rewarding the desired behaviors, and redirecting unwanted behaviors into ones we can reward, you will be teaching your dog what you like and expect. Just as with raising a small child, teaching dogs what will make you happy and what will upset you is a 24 hour/ 7 days a week job! Dogs and children are always learning. You need to make a decision to be sure they are learning what you want them to learn.

Love your dog

When the dog is being bad, this is not always easy. It is very easy to get frustrated with them and perhaps even want to lash out at them. When this happens, take a moment to take a deep breath, then assess the situation. What can you do to prevent it? What alternative behavior can you try to get the dog to do so you can reward it? Is it a natural behavior the dog needs an outlet for? Is anyone else allowing the dog to practice the unwanted behavior? Can you use the situation to teach the dog self-control? Does the dog need more exercise? Would the dog be doing this behavior if he was tired? Are your desires being communicated clearly to the dog? When you answer these questions, it is likely that you will have something to work with. You'll have a behavior (or more than one) you can watch for and reward. You will understand how to prevent the unwanted and reward the good dog.