

ASK THE TRAINER

Be Mindful of the Moment



Do any of these scenarios sound familiar?

Your dog dashes out the door, ignoring your calls to come. He jumps up on someone to

say hello while you repeatedly call him to come. Finally he does, and you say “Bad dog!”

You suddenly realize how quiet it is and wonder what your dog may be up to, only to find her chewing on a new pair of expensive eyewear, shoes, or a pen. You say, “Drop it.” She does, and you say “Bad dog!”

You let your dog out into the yard. It’s 6 a.m., and he starts to bark. You are in your pyjamas, and you call for him to come. He does, and you say “Bad dog! No barking!”

You take a roast out of the oven and go to answer the phone. Out of the corner of your eye, you see your dog jumping up onto the counter to reach for it. You say “off,” she listens, and you say “Bad dog!”

These are all very common scenarios, and it feels right to want to punish your dog in that moment. Frustration takes over logic. It is imperative to be mindful of those moments, as they are great training and learning opportunities for your dog.

Imagine it from your dog’s point of view. Say you were in the middle of doing something and someone called you over. You listen only to get punished. Would you go again the next time that person called?

Behaviour is driven by consequences. This is what’s called Thorndike’s Law of Effect. It’s all about what happens right



after a behaviour. Good things happen, and your dog will repeat the behaviour. Bad things happen, and your dog will learn to avoid the behaviour.

Reward your dog for doing the right behaviour even if he was doing the wrong behaviour moments before. If your dog comes when called, drops the item when cued, or gets off the counter when asked, then those are the moments that need to be reinforced, rewarded, and praised.

So what can you do to prevent your dog from doing “bad” behaviours?

Teach your dog a reliable recall. That is, to immediately return to you when called. Coming to you should be much more rewarding than whatever he or she is doing. <http://clickerdogs.com/perfectrecall.htm>

Keep items out of reach if your dog is not allowed to chew on them. Make sure that your dog has plenty of toys to play with and supervise him to prevent mistakes.

If your dog is “counter surfing,” climbing up on the counters, management is the best option. Don’t let her learn that behaviour in the first place by keeping the counters free of

any food. Don’t feed table food while you are preparing it. Teach your dog an alternate behaviour, such as going to her bed and staying put while food is out. If your dog is about to go for that roast and you tell her to get off and she listens, reward her.

If your dog is in the backyard and barking, consider the reasons why. Is he bored? Did he hear a sound or see a squirrel? Accompany your dog outside. Reward him for paying attention to you. Teach him to be quiet when cued. Reward him for silence. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vtN8NhofOw>

Every moment we have with our dogs is an opportunity to affect their behaviour. Dogs want to know what’s in it for them and need motivation, just like we do. Make sure the behaviours you want are generously and consistently reinforced and the behaviours you don’t like are prevented through diligent management rather than punishment.

Treat your dog as a learner and not your adversary and always be mindful of the moment.

Marlo Hiltz, CPDT-KA