

SO YOUR DOG LIKES TO CHASE THINGS?



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You may have heard of Fenton, a Labrador who became a YouTube sensation after he decided to chase some deer at Richmond Park in England ([see the clip here](#)). I'm sure most of us find this movie kind of funny, but we have also been in a similar situation with our own dogs, and then it becomes somewhat less funny.

What is actually going on here? I recently went to the SPARCS conference on canine behaviour, where one of the speakers was ethologist Dr. Raymond Coppinger, who has dedicated his life to studying the origin and evolution of canines. He and other speakers at the conference talked about behavioural motor patterns in dogs.

Dogs, just like other animal species, have behavioural sequences called Fixed Action Patterns (FAPs), which occur when they are presented with certain stimuli. FAPs are genetically encoded, hardwired behaviours that must be completed once started because such behaviours are (or have been) essential for the survival of the species. This is exactly what we see with Fenton: something very primal is triggered inside his brain when he sees the deer, and he doesn't understand that he is actually putting himself in danger of being run over by a car – and I am 99.9% certain that he cannot even hear his owner calling him.



We humans have moulded the FAPs of canines by breeding. The whole motor pattern starting from seeing the prey animal to actually eating it for dinner consists of the following behaviours: Orient > Eye > Stalk > Chase > Grab-bite > Kill-bite.

Selective breeding of dogs has produced stunted versions of the above motor pattern. For example, if you have ever seen herding dogs at work, it is pretty obvious that they carry out the motor pattern to the point of chase; some breeds (like my Australian Shepherds) may nip the livestock a little bit, but they don't proceed to the point of kill-bite. Our friend Fenton is a retriever. They are bred to orient to the prey, chase it, and then stop the motor pattern at grab-bite, which is the point where they would bring the fallen bird to the hunter without eating it. Humans are quite genius in having been able to develop these different breeds!

What can do we do when our dog shows these behaviours in an unwanted context, like chasing deer across a road? It certainly will not be easy if your dog is already in the hunting mode! There is a reason why we have heard people say that it is very difficult to train a recall to a hound.

Preventing your dog from getting into life-threatening situations is a combination of management and training. For example, if your dog has directed his hunting ambitions to skateboarders and other fast-moving objects, it is important to try to avoid putting him into situations where he can chase skateboarders (I know this is sometimes more easily said than done in the summer) because these hardwired behaviours spread like wildfire. Then it is important to train attention tools often, first when there are no arousing stimuli present.

I start with highly structured recall training, which I do every day A LOT, always reinforcing the dog coming back to me with something absolutely amazing. The frustrating part is that to override something as hardwired as the FAPs, we have to work hundreds of times harder to get what we want. Obviously, with some dogs it comes easier than with others. I, for example, have one of both extremes at home. In addition, as I always keep saying in my Cranky Canine classes, we need to take into consideration that having certain dog breeds in an urban environment is challenging and can also be unfair to the dog if we don't provide them with enough mental and physical stimulation, so make sure to engage your dog in activities that she enjoys doing with you.