

# **BCSPCA - UNDERSTANDING CANINE BEHAVIOR**

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Preventing or Reducing Behaviour Problems

## **UNDERSTANDING CANINE BEHAVIOUR**

Preventing or reducing behaviour problems ensures that you and your dog will have a satisfying relationship rather than a life full of anxiety, worries and frustration. First you must understand that some dogs are more prone to certain behaviour problems because of their temperament and have learned to respond a certain way to various situations. While you can help most dogs be behaviourally healthy and well-mannered, in some cases you may need the help of a qualified behaviourist, trainer or veterinarian. Understanding dog behaviour means fewer misunderstandings such as "he's mad at me, that's why he pees on my bed." It also means less disappointment because of unrealistic expectations. Learn how to observe, interpret, and respond appropriately to your dog's body language. Finally, understanding the needs of dogs regarding daily care - including feeding, exercise, interactions with people and other animals will help you meet your dog's needs.

## **UNDERSTANDING CANINE EMOTION**

Emotions play an important role in how your dog behaves. Destructive behaviour when left alone can be a sign of anxiety, and avoidance and aggression are often motivated by fear. Once you understand the emotional state such as anxiety, fear or frustration, you can change his emotional response into a positive emotion for a particular situation and his behaviour will improve. Instead of trying to change the emotion of the dog (for example from fear to pleasure), many people train their dog to obey a command when the dog reacts negatively (example: making a dog sit instead of lunging at people). This may make him behave appropriately but he still feels scared or threatened and therefore he is still stressed. Changing the reaction to a person, animal or situation by exposing him to the situation and making it have a positive outcome (person giving the dog treats every time the dog sees the person he normally fears) is a more productive way to change a dog's behaviour because it is changing his response from fear to happy anticipation.

## **UNDERSTANDING HOW YOUR BEHAVIOUR AFFECTS YOUR DOG**

Many guardians unknowingly play a significant role in the development of their dog's behaviour problem. Ask yourself if you giving your dog attention when he misbehaves rather than when he behaves properly.

- Do you give your dog clear and consistent instructions about what you expect of him?
- Do you apply consistent consequences or only address a problem sometimes and not at other times?

- Are you giving your dog a chance to experience success or are you setting him up to display undesirable behaviour and punish him instead?

## Effective and Humane Ways to Change Behaviour

Training a dog to change his behaviour should be done using positive or negative consequences to a behaviour. The negative consequence should never be physical or involve fear. Positive consequences: Follow the desired behaviour with something the dog finds rewarding (for example, give a treat when dog sits to greet someone at the door). Behaviour of sitting increases in frequency. Negative consequences: Follow the undesired behaviour with the removal of a reward (for example, remove your attention by turning away from the dog when he barks for attention). Behaviour decreases in frequency. \*Temporary withdrawal of attention is one of the most humane and effective consequence for reducing unwanted behaviour. Physical or verbal consequences can result in a dog that may become fearful and will not be as eager to work with you. The use of positive consequences to establish desired behaviours and negative consequences to discourage unwanted behaviours is usually sufficient to have a well-behaved dog. However, in some circumstances, if the dog continues to not respond appropriately you should seek help from a qualified professional.

### HAVE FUN, FUN, FUN!

Learning new things should be a fun experience for you and your dog. Clicker training is highly recommended by the BC SPCA. It is easy to learn for you and your dog. It is cheap and very effective. Simply associate the click with a food reward in your first session (click first and treat after). Once your dog knows that the click means a reward is coming you can use it to "Shape or capture " wanted behaviour or lure him into a desired position.

- Shaping: When you Shape new behaviours, you reward your dog for each closer approximation to the desired behaviour. For example, if you want to teach your dog to retrieve an object using shaping, first you might reward him for just sniffing it. Then reward him for picking it up. Finally, you would reward him for bringing the object to you. Shaping is also called successive approximation.
- Capturing: Capturing involves waiting for your dog to perform a behaviour that you wish to strengthen. The moment he performs the desired behaviour without incentive, click and reward him. For example, if you wanted to teach your dog to lie down using capturing, you would wait until he chooses to lie down, then click (using a clicker to mark the exact moment of the desired behaviour) and reward him.
- Luring: Some dogs, particularly puppies may need a little help to understand what you want them to do. It is better to lure a dog into position rather than pushing his body. Luring means putting a treat in front of the dog's nose and guiding him into the desired position. For example, if you want to teach your dog to sit using a lure, you hold the treat in front of your dog and move it in an upward arc. If your dog follows this movement, he will finish in the Sit position; then you click and give a treat.

\*There are many good books available to help you clicker train your dog. [Click here](#) to see our recommended resources.

## **VETERINARIAN HELP**

Many behaviour problems that do not get solved with training alone may be because the dog has a disease that causes him to behave a certain way. Some emotional or behaviour problems are too serious. There are a variety of drug therapies that can be used in conjunction with training. Ask your veterinarian.

## **REMEMBER**

Positive, humane methods are proven and effective training techniques to increase positive behaviour and decrease negative behaviour. It does not mean that you must tolerate bad behaviour. While food should not be used as a bribe, it is an important tool for indicating to your dog that he has done well. It should be used like a paycheque for work well done. If food does not motivate your dog find a toy or a positive verbal response that will make him want to do more. A dog that has learned a behaviour in one context will not necessarily perform it in another. Dog should be given the opportunity to perform the behaviour in a range of different contexts. CAUTION: The use of negative reinforcement (punishment) should always be as mild as possible and never involve pain or intimidation. Negative reinforcement should only be applied when all other methods failed and always under the supervision of a qualified professional. Established in 1898 The British Columbia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (BC SPCA) was formed as a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting and enhancing the quality of life for domestic, farm and wild animals in BC.