

## How Dogs Learn

Dogs learn through a system of trial and error. They are natural problem solvers, and this means that they like to think about and try different ways to get what they want. If an action gets them what they want, they are going to continue doing it. The opposite is also true, things that don't work are likely to disappear over time (the behaviour will have a natural extinction). EVERYTHING your dog does has meaning for him! I have never seen a dog do something repeatedly, knowing to get nothing in return. When they repeat the same behaviour over and over, it means there was some kind of external reward or self-satisfaction for that behaviour at some point in time.

Dogs do things for a reason: to get to the resources such as food, playtime, water, attention, love, affection, access to people or other dogs, toys, pleasures such as running or playing outside, sniffing, digging, sleeping on the couch, or they act to make something scary or annoying go away by growling, lunging, biting etc., In principle, every action is by choice except for REACTIONS

What is the difference between action and reaction?

**ACTION:** When your dog uses his thinking brain, he will perform an action after he has heard, seen or smelled a cue ( you putting your shoes on to take him for a walk is a cue, He may get excited or run to the door to sit politely and wait for you to put his leash on = the action)

**REACTION:** When your dog is reacting, he does not think, but rather his body is overtaken by negative emotions: fear, anger, frustration, in which case we would see a fight response (barking aggressively, lunging) or flight (hiding, cowering, running away) or freeze response (where the dog stills like a statue, stuck between the choices), OR by positive emotions: overexcited, overjoyed, desire, lust, resulting in uncontrolled whining, barking, jumping up etc. Even though these are exciting behaviours once the dog is over the threshold, there is no further room for thought.

Think about this example:

Your dog is excited to see someone but is attached to the leash and can't get to them.

If your dog gets excited and starts jumping and pulling towards the person WHILE NOT REALLY THINKING BUT RATHER REACTING TO EMOTIONS, and then gets to interact with them, we have just reinforced that excitement, jumping and pulling which gets them what they want.

On the other hand, if the dog sees someone and gets excited and we only allow the person to come to visit once the dog chooses to sit, we have ACTIVATED THE THINKING BRAIN AND reinforced the sit and calm with the opportunity to greet a person. Your dog learns that even when exciting things are happening, they will not gain access until they show a modicum of self-control and activate their thinking brain

When we talk about the behaviour of dogs, we often wonder just how much they truly understand. We have learned that dogs do indeed experience emotions much like us and science has also revealed that dogs' understanding is at about the level of an intelligent 2-year-old child

This new understanding of dogs will affect our training method choices, after all, if you would not use your training methods on a 2-year-old, you likely should not use them on a dog either. Ask yourself these questions when training: Would I do this to a 2-year-old child? Is there a better way? How is my dog feeling? Am I helping my dog gain confidence? Am I helping my dog learn a better way? Am I helping my dog make better choices? This can only be answered with yes if you use training tools and methods that activate your dog's thinking brain and allow him to learn about making better choices, choices that will lead to pleasant outcomes for your dog and as a side effect, for you as well. The learning experience for both you and your dog should be something that you can bond over. Any good relationship is based on building trust and positive feedback.

Pairing a positive experience such as play, food, praise, and gentle touch with a behaviour just performed will get your dog to WANT to offer that behaviour again and again, in the chance he can earn another same or similar reward!

Remember that most dogs will feel empowered and justified in their actions when you interact with them when they are misbehaving: jumping up on people, they get verbal communication, and often physical contact, for your dog that is a win!! Mostly they don't care if you are upset, angry, or annoyed, they just got a solid response from you!

Let's make sure our dogs learn to make better choices and reward those efforts so they will want to repeat that positive behaviour!