



Enhancing the bond between dogs and their families

Stubbornness

Question: My dog is very stubborn and will only respond to me if I have a treat and there are no other distractions. How can I get him to respond all of the time?

The Trainer Answers: There is a common misconception that dogs trained with treats and positive reinforcement will only work for the “bribe” of a treat and that if he does not respond without a treat present, he is being stubborn. Assuming that a dog is being stubborn often implies that the dog knows what you want but willfully disobeys you. By viewing the situation in this manner, we set ourselves up for a confrontation. In most cases, the truth is that the training is incomplete. Your dog has been taught to respond in very specific situations but it has not been taught sufficiently for him to understand the same cue in a wider variety of settings and with greater distractions.

Dogs often are not very good at generalizing learned behaviors. Even though a dog knows what “sit” means at home when treats are being given out does not mean the dog knows what “sit” means while out on your daily walk. If you have only practiced the behavior in specific locations or circumstances, he probably does not know what you mean in new situations. Another example is the context of the situation in relation to you. Most dogs are taught to perform behaviors directly in front of you. When asked to perform the same behavior with your back turned to the dog, it will often either result in a blank stare or the dog running to the front of you to perform the behavior. Now, let's say you are facing the front door and he can't get in front of you. How can he possibly sit?!

In some situations, the cue that you think your dog knows is not the cue he really knows. I sometimes test my group class clients by having them do the following: Stand near your dog. Stand straight up, hands behind your back, and say, “sit” with no body language given. Some dogs will sit, but many will not. Are they being stubborn? On the contrary, they understand the body language or hand signal that always accompanies the word, “sit.” These dogs know the body language or hand signal that means “sit” but not the verbal cue. Most people are very surprised, because they assumed the dog was responding to a verbal cue. They often are not even aware they were communicating through body language.

If treats have always been used in context with having the dog perform a specific cue, quite often the treat itself becomes a part of the cue. When the treat is absent, the dog no longer understands the cue. This is why you should remove the treat from in front of the dog's face as soon as the dog begins to understand what you want. Only bring out the treat after your dog has done what you want. Also, use as many OTHER types of rewards as you can so your dog does not always expect a treat, but does anticipate something good happening – perhaps petting, play time, a walk, a toy, or something else he enjoys. Does your dog sit or perform another behavior as soon as he sees the treats come out without you telling him to do anything? Guess what? The treat itself is not just a part of the cue, but the entire cue, to perform a behavior!

Expecting your dog to work despite distractions takes additional step-by-step training once you are sure your dog really knows your cues.

I've asked my husband many times to shut off lights when he is finished in a particular room. He sometimes leaves the lights on despite my frequent reminders. Since he's not doing what I ask him to do immediately every time, should I assume he is being stubborn? Perhaps I need to demonstrate more clearly who the alpha is at our house. . .

