



DOG BEHAVIOR

The purpose of this lecture is to discuss the reasons for common dog behaviors and to provide guidelines for interacting with your dog effectively to manage behaviors. This lesson will explain:

- Dog instincts
- How dogs learn and maintain skills
- Reinforcement vs. punishment
- Behaviors caused by fear/stress
- Scavenging when working
- Food refusal training

Dog Instincts

Many dog behaviors that are considered inappropriate by people are caused by instincts.

Common instinctive behaviors include:

- Trying to socialize with other dogs
- Picking up food off the ground
- Alerting to a small animal or moving object like a tennis ball
- Sniffing

Your dog has shown himself through training to have acceptable levels of instinct; however, we can never eliminate instinct entirely, and most guide dog handlers will have to manage instinctive behaviors to some extent throughout their dogs' working lives.

How Dogs Learn and Maintain Skills

Pilot Dogs learn new skills through positive reinforcement training. In positive reinforcement training, the instructor uses a “bridge word” to mark the moment when the dog performs the desired behavior, and follows the “bridge word” with food reward. The dog is not given a food

reward for every correct response to a command; instructors use what is called "random reinforcement" to keep behaviors strong.

For example, a dog being randomly reinforced for stopping at curbs will not get a food reward every single time he stops at a curb; the dog will get a food reward at about one curb out of every five curbs. Because the dog never knows which curb stop will earn a food reward, he is likely to continue stopping at curbs in hopes that each curb will be the one that results in a food reward.

Positive reinforcement contrasts with compulsion, the method of training formerly used at guide dog schools. In compulsion-based training, the dog is punished for doing the wrong behaviors rather than being rewarded for doing the right behaviors. While compulsion-based training did work, many studies have shown that positive reinforcement-based training produces reliable behaviors and causes less stress to the dog. Also, positive reinforcement-based handling methods draw less negative attention from the public.

Reinforcement vs. Punishment

Reinforcement is anything that makes a behavior more likely to be repeated in the future. Food is the most common reinforcement used in guide work, but praise, both verbal and physical, can also be very reinforcing to a dog. Punishment is anything that makes a behavior less likely to be repeated in the future. Firm verbal corrections and leash corrections appropriate to the dog's temperament are the only types of corrections used by Pilot Dogs.

Although punishment can be effective in some situations, especially those involving strong instinctive distractions, punishment can negatively affect your relationship with your dog if overused. It is generally better to find a way to positively reinforce desirable behavior than to punish undesirable behavior.

Behaviors Caused by Fear/Stress

Pilot Dogs must show a certain level of confidence and stability in order to make it through the training program; however, even the most confident dog will show fear on occasion. Fear reactions are more common when the dog is in a stressful situation, such as transitioning to a new handler in class. Some common causes of fear reactions are:

- Loud noises, such as a backfiring car, fireworks, thunder, or noisy trucks, especially when the dog cannot see the source
- People that the dog perceives as abnormal, such as people in unusual attire, people with awkward gaits, people running, or people staring directly at the dog
- Inanimate objects, such as statues, garbage cans lying on the ground, or blowing bags

When your dog is afraid, he may:

- Stop and freeze while staring straight ahead
- Jump or bolt
- Tremble
- Hide behind you
- Bark or growl

If you think your dog is afraid of something, keep these guidelines in mind:

- Don't correct the dog; that is likely to cause more fear.
- Don't baby the dog; the dog will think you're scared too.
- Be supportive and matter-of-fact in your handling.
- If the dog is afraid of a person, say hello to the person.
- If the dog is afraid of an object, demonstrate there is nothing to be afraid of by approaching the object, if possible, and gently touching it.
- If your dog is afraid and you don't know why, ask if there is anyone around to help, and ask that person to tell you what your dog is watching.
- If your dog refuses "Forward" because of fear, you can try tugging the leash gently forward and asking the dog to "Let's go," but if he continues refusing, don't force it. There may be a legitimate reason not to go forward.

Scavenging When Working

Scavenging is a serious problem. It results in poor concentration, often in areas where good concentration is needed most. Possible causes of scavenging behavior are:

- Insufficient control
- Inconsistent control

- Lack of praise and reward for doing the correct behavior
- Lack of awareness

If you suspect that your dog is stopping, deviating from your usual route, or lowering his head to pick up debris, here are possible remedies:

- Correct immediately using a physical check on the handle as well as vocal commands such as “No.” As soon as your dog leaves or moves on from the item, praise and reward.
- Never give your dog the benefit of the doubt as far as scavenging or other distractions are concerned.
- Correct on the smallest suspicion of a misdemeanor. If your assessment of the situation was correct, you have checked the development of a potentially major problem. If you were wrong, the dog does not bear you a grudge, providing you remember to balance your corrections with praise.
- In an area that you know is badly strewn with food and litter, it may be wise to keep your leash loosely held in your right hand. In this way, you are able to give a firm, instant leash correction for any attempts to scavenge.
- If your dog succeeds in picking up food, you must stop immediately, correct him vocally using a firm tone of voice, and remove the food from his mouth.
- If scavenging appears to be worsening, please contact Pilot Dogs.

Food Refusal Training

If your dog steals food in the home or begs for food, firm corrective measures should be taken. Such training usually necessitates setting “traps” and gaining the assistance of a sighted friend or member of the family. Always remember that prevention is better than cure and your dog should never be allowed the chance to steal or scrounge for food. Food left close to the edge of the table is a great temptation for any unsupervised dog!

Food refusal training for dogs that steal food:

1. Begin by placing a plate of food on a low table or chair.
2. Bring your dog into the room on the lead and make him lie down near the food.
3. If he makes any attempt to sniff the plate, correct him firmly with the martingale and with your voice – “No.”

4. Do this for several sessions - until he shows no interest in food - before allowing him off the lead.
 - If he is tempted to take advantage of his newfound freedom, use a very firm voice to discourage him.
 - If necessary, return to leash-controlled situations and start the training again.

Food refusal training for dogs that beg for food: A dog that begs for food is quite likely to receive it; the result of this behavior is the increased likelihood of both obesity and unfavorable responses from members of the public. Once established, begging is a difficult but not impossible habit to break.

Education of the human offenders should be the starting point. It is necessary to set up “traps” with the help of friends or relatives. The procedure is quite straightforward but, as with any other form of control, it is important that it is applied with due regard to the sensitivity of each individual dog.

1. Begin with your dog on the leash, sitting or lying down quietly beside you.
2. Your assistant then offers your dog a biscuit or similar item of food, making sure that it remains just out of reach of your dog’s mouth.
3. As soon as your dog makes a move towards the “bait”, apply both vocal and physical corrections, as outlined above.

You need to be very firm initially. Repeat this exercise daily, preferably using different times, locations, and assistants, so your dog does not learn to refuse food only in certain situations, but rather develops a general awareness of how to behave in the event of temptation from any source.