



Paws, Claws & Wings

Physical and Behavioral Rehabilitation for Animals



How dogs learn:

Dogs learn by associating their actions with the immediate consequences. Dogs need a positive reaction to their correct actions within one second of the required action being performed. The consequences of their reactions are viewed as positive if they offer a reward to the dog. Some results that dogs view as positive are: treats, attention (even if it is seen by the owner as scolding the dog) play, interaction, toys, touch. The body language that the owner uses around the dog is very valuable to the dog as he interprets it as either positive or negative.

How to train dogs:

I use a program that is called operant conditioning. This entails getting the dog to perform an action because the action has a positive result or reward. An action that the dog performs that is undesirable to the owner must receive an immediate negative reaction. This does NOT include physical punishment or shouting at the dog. A negative reaction from the owner is not reacting to the undesirable action at all or interrupting the action. The dog must be motivated and have a reason to perform the desirable behaviour. Overzealous punishment is the main reason dogs develop behaviour problems. The dog sees it as painful and scary and will avoid the owner as he sees the owner as the cause of the punishment and not the undesirable action he has performed. Anything that causes the dog to show fear towards the owner is seen as abuse.

The ideal way to train a dog to perform desirable reactions is to immediately reward the correct actions and immediately ignore the incorrect actions. Remember that the behaviours the owner often sees as 'wrong' is actually quite normal for the dog. That is why we refer to behaviours as acceptable or unacceptable (to the owner, not the dog). The owner must only have realistic expectations of the dog's behaviour and not expect the dog to perform miracles. No physical force must be used when working with any animal. Consistency and lots and lots of practice is very important in training a dog.

Socialisation and habituation:

If a dog is going to be a pleasurable, well behaved dog in social situations he will need to be socialized. Socialisation includes exposing the dog to as many different experiences as possible from as young an age as possible. Ensure that the experiences are seen as pleasurable and do not scare the dog. This includes exposing the dog to other animals, other dogs, different races, genders, sizes, and clothing. The dog will then see that new things are usually fun and will be much more open to accept new situations. This will 'habituate' or get the dog accept new stimuli without being afraid or stressed. This is more difficult with older dogs as they generally have set responses already but this can be slowly and calmly changed.

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Environmental enrichment:

One of the easiest ways to ensure you have a happy, healthy dog is to provide environmental enrichment. This includes providing the dog with many choices of activities. The dog must have lots of variety in its environment. Environmental enrichment includes many different toys, games, objects to chew and places to explore. The dog will be happiest if the owner handles his resources, this includes: deciding when to give or take away toys, initiate the games, decide when it is quiet time and control access to high value areas (boundaries, kitchen, areas where the most interactions occur). This enables the dog to see where they fit into the family / pack. The dog that is sure of its place in the world will be much more secure in its environment.

Physical care:

If you are planning to have a long, happy, loving relationship with your dog, good preventative health care is essential. Dogs need to be up to date with their vaccinations and deworming's. Deworming's should be done every 6 months and vaccinations need to be given every year (even to an adult dog). This will prevent deadly conditions such as worm burdens, parvo virus, distemper, rabies and many more. It is also a good idea to get your vet to give your dog a general check-up each year, including a dental if needed. These precautions will enable you to have a lasting relationship with your dog.

Nutrition:

Nutrition is very important to dog in each stage of his life. Correct nutrition is one of the easiest ways to ensure that you have a healthy dog. Feeding a complete pelleted diet is the best way to give your dog a balanced diet. Remember that a dog nutritional needs change as they age so the diet will have to be modified as the dog reaches different life stages. Another important point to remember is that the size of the dogs breed will also influence the nutrition the puppy needs. Imagine trying to feed a chihuahua puppy and a Great Dane puppy the same type and amount of food, impossible. Human food snacks must be limited and only given as a treat on YOUR terms not as the dog demands them.

Shaping behaviour:

The way that we teach a dog to perform desired behaviours is called shaping or luring. We lure the dog with a treat until he does what we want, and then we treat him. We start with very small steps and then add the steps together to create a complete behaviour.

Sterilization:



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Sterilisation is one of the easiest ways to prevent cancer in your dog. If your female dog / bitch is sterilised before the first time she comes into heat / season, her chances of cancer are greatly lessened. If your male dog is sterilised before he is 10 months old the chances of cancer are lessened. Sterilisation DOES NOT change the dog's personality. Males (If castrated early enough) may be easier to handle. The other great benefit of sterilisation is having no unwanted puppies. There are so many puppies that have to be euthanized each day as there are not enough good homes for them - please do not add to this burden.

