

SOUTH COAST VET CARE ~ ANIMAL MATTER'S

HOW DOGS LEARN

The fundamental principle behind learning in all animals is that **behaviour and actions that are rewarded will happen more often**. If a dog does something that brings it a reward it increases the likelihood that it will do it again. If a dog does something that does not bring it a reward it increases the possibility that it will not do it again.

A dog's learning comes from direct association, repetition, environment and stimuli. Dogs will perform any acts that will bring them pleasant results and discontinue those that bring unpleasant results.

Dogs do not have morals and so have no concept of good or bad. Dogs do not feel guilt or spite. If you need to reprimand your dog you can only do so if you catch it in the act. Do not tell your dog off **after** an offending deed has been done. Your dog **cannot** make the connection between the discipline and the offending deed. Your dog will associate being told off with its current action. For example you get home and find that your dog has eaten a piece of food that was on the kitchen bench and he is now lying quietly on his bed. If you tell your dog off now it will associate it with lying quietly on its bed. Your dog will know that you are angry but will not make the connection with taking the food from the kitchen bench earlier. Your dog may look guilty, but not because he understands what he has done: he looks guilty because he understands that you are upset. Dogs cannot understand every word that you say – they can only interpret your tone of voice and body language.

Remember that an action that is rewarded is most likely to be repeated. Behaviour will disappear if it is not rewarded. Use this to your advantage when training. This does not mean that you have to reward all responses, in fact once your dog understands a cue, only the best responses should be rewarded. The quality of the response will decline if the dog learns that any response no matter how slow or uninterested it may be will earn a reward. The behaviour will only disappear if you continue to fail to reward any response regardless of speed or eagerness. Vary the rewards you use, alternating between food, hand praise and voice praise. The aim is to keep the dog guessing.

It is also important to remember that dogs learn regardless of whether or not we are actively teaching them. Every time you interact with your dog, some form of training takes place. For instance if you give your cute puppy a tit bit from the dinner table you are training your dog to beg at the table for food and it is likely that he will beg at the dinner table when he is no longer a cute puppy but a drooling adolescent!

Dogs do not generalise well. For example you may have taught your dog to sit inside the house but if you want him to sit in the garden or at the park then you will need to teach him this from the beginning again in these new situations. As trainers we often hear "but our dog does it at home"; no doubt that your dog does, but he hasn't generalised the lesson that you have taught him. In order for your dog to really understand the meaning of any of the words that you teach him you will need to teach them in a variety of situations.

LEADERSHIP

Humans domesticated the dog and in doing so assumed responsibility for his well-being. So, for dogs to survive in our world we must teach him to live by our rules.

If we think about it, there is not much difference between the basic principles of bringing up a puppy and bringing up our own children. Both need to be loved, wanted, understood, and taught how to behave. Both need boundaries, tolerance, clear consistent rules and some form of a predictable routine to their life.

A good leadership program can do this and be remarkably effective . In a dogs eyes only the leader has the right to direct, control or inhibit resources and have first access to them. It makes sense then for owners to demonstrate leadership and communicate effectively with their dogs in a manner the dogs will understand – and that is to control resources by making access contingent on behaviour.

Leadership is primarily about control of resources; and resources are simply what the dog wants or needs. As leaders we tend to control all of the dogs essential resources for living.

- food
- water
- shelter.

We also control other essentials for the dogs enjoyment of life (life rewards).

- exercise
- play
- praise
- games
- affection
- interaction with other dogs
- freedom.

If you as the leader, have control of these resources, then you have the ability to control your dog

The Nothing in Life is Free Program (NILIF) Privileges must be earned:

The basis if the NILIF program is that the owner takes charge of the resources, life rewards, interactions and activities the dog considers to be of value and puts a condition on them. Once the dog has learned a simple behaviour such as SIT, the owner can ask for that behaviour to earn selected privileges (petting, games, going for a walk or out in the car, meals, treats, etc). The owner requires that the dog give a certain behaviour or behave in a certain way (sit calmly to have his lead attached) to obtain its privilege. If it does not do as required, the owner simply, quietly and calmly removes the resource he desires. This must be absolutely consistent 24-7. The dog will soon learn to look to you as the leader as you have control of the resources.

Life in the world of wolves and feral dogs:

Contrary to popular belief, in the world of wolves, leaders will not use physical domination to achieve rank; to do so lowers their status – only middle management squabble (the wanna-bes). Instead, outcomes are established through ritualistic behaviour/displays. Life in a wolf group is not a democracy. Each group has leaders - who by virtue of their confidence, intelligence, strength and consistence are deferred to by the other members of the group. The leaders are confident in their ability to handle challenges from other group members and they provide clear indications as to acceptable behaviour.

But what about life in our world?

Similarly, in our world Deeper's place **must be defined for him**, otherwise he will assess the members of your family (his social group) and determine for himself where he fits in. So, to enjoy a happy, hassle free relationship with Deeper, you must provide him with leadership.

Deefer is happiest when he is in a secure and well-defined social order. It is far less stressful for him to follow the leaders and therefore be relieved of responsibility for the welfare of the family, than for him to be uncertain of where he fits in.

Deefer determines his relationship to the members of your family in a variety of ways. We have found the following areas to have the most impact on Deefer's view of his family status:

- ❖ winning games and possession of toys or resources
- ❖ where he sleeps and for whom he vacates territory.
- ❖ food management
- ❖ attention received from family members.

Some of these areas may be more important to Deefer than others — and some may be more important to you. Let's look at these areas more closely.

Winning games and possession of toys or resources:

The leaders of the family are the ones who control when games start and when they finish, as well as being the owners of all the toys — Deefer only gets to borrow the leaders toys! Toys are like captured prey — the leaders share only on their terms.

So family members should initiate and end most play sessions, and should also retain possession of toys after most play sessions. This becomes an indicator to Deefer that you control his resources and that you will play only on your terms. Ensure that to begin with you win the majority of the games played, but don't win all the games, or Deefer will give up wanting to play with you!

Where Deefer sleeps and for whom he vacates territory:

Deefer views his sleeping area as a special place in terms of family order. In Deefer's view, the better your sleeping or resting area, the higher your ranking, as the leaders usually have the highest ground and the best place to rest. So for Deefer, sleeping in a high, comfortable position from which territory can be surveyed (your bed), can be the ultimate indicator of pack position!

This can cause problems, particularly with children whom Deefer may view as litter-mates if allowed to share their beds. This is not to say that Deefer must never be allowed on the beds, however you must ensure that he will always vacate the beds on request and will allow all family members to invade these spaces.

Deefer should also be taught that he must move from any place in the family's territory when requested to. Deefer should always yield to his family members. In the early stages of reinforcing Deefer's position in the family it is usually best if he is generally allocated a lower physical position than his family members. So if you are on the lounge, Deefer should be on the floor until you are sure he knows his place.

If you have any problems in this area ensure Deefer doesn't gain access to your sleeping quarters or other areas he may see as important territory until you are able to establish your leadership more effectively. You need to speak with your Instructor about this.

Food management:

Deefer views food as a major resource - it is necessary for survival! In doggy lore the leaders of the group control access to food. So if you are in control of his food, Deefer will see you as leadership material.

Do not leave food lying around for Deefer — this means no bowls of dog biscuits left out! Deefer should be offered his food when you decide — he will not starve as long as he is fed regularly and given adequate time to eat his portion before his bowl is removed. Any bones you give to Deefer should be removed once he has finished with them, not left lying around the yard.

Make it obvious to Deefer that all food is provided by you — he should not see himself as being self-sufficient. We find that this is one of the easiest leadership exercises to implement, as all you need to do is offer food at your convenience. Even better, break his meals into smaller portions and use these

as training rewards. He'll then see you as the primary provider and you'll be reinforcing behaviours you want him to learn.

Attention received from family members:

The leaders of the group give attention to other members only when they want to. Sometimes the other group members will try to gain the leaders' attention by exhibiting what we call "attention seeking behaviour". We have listed some attention seeking behaviours below. We have also listed the usual human response in brackets — Deeper sees any of these responses as attention:

- ~ Barking at you or visitors (*you look in his direction and chastise him*)
- ~ Whining, and wiggling around you (*you ask him what's wrong and pat him*)
- ~ Pawing at you (*you either take his paw, or chastise him*)
- ~ Leaning on you (*you absent-mindedly pat or rub him*)
- ~ Jumping up on you (*you either cuddle him, pick him up, or chastise*)
- ~ Laying his head on your knee (*you think this is cute and pat him*)
- ~ Nudging his nose under your arm (*cute - you pat him or talk to him*)
- ~ Pulling clothes off the line (*you chastise him and sometimes chase him!*)
- ~ Grabbing your belongings (*you yell and chase him trying to get them back!*)
- ~ Prancing on his hind legs and waving his paws (*small dogs are great at this!*)

There are many other behaviours Deeper may try as well. So, it may look cute when Deeper comes up wagging his tail and rubbing against you, however if you always pay attention to him when he does this he will begin to demand your attention more often. If you keep complying with his demands for attention he may eventually try to improve his position in the family group.

This does not mean that you should deprive Deeper of attention — you can actually give him more attention — but on your terms. So, ask Deeper to sit or lie down before patting him, (NILIF) or wait until he settles down before talking to him. By doing this, Deeper will learn that he **must please you in order to gain your affection and attention.**

Other ideas:

It can be a mistake to include Deeper in every activity of the household every time. This can lead to Deeper becoming very dependent on you and not being able to cope without you around. As much as you want to reinforce your leadership, Deeper must still have confidence in himself and an ability to cope when on his own. Including Deeper in everything could also cause him to feel frustrated if he is left out of an activity and he could become pushy with his demands to be included.

The reality is that there are times when Deeper will not be able to accompany you on your trips away from the house. There are times when Deeper will not be able to join a game you are playing — perhaps when you have small children visiting and Deeper doesn't understand the rules of toddler play. Or times when you are busy with maintenance activities in which Deeper really cannot participate!

Teach Deeper that sometimes he is expected to be happy with his own company by providing "quiet times" at irregular intervals throughout every day and deliberately leaving him out of some activities. These are good times to reinforce Deeper for relaxing with a Kong, other chew-toy, or a bone.

It is also important to teach Deeper that not every interaction with you will be exciting. Sometimes leaders and followers can be together in the same area, without having to interact. For example, teach Deeper to lie quietly at a distance from you instead of drooling on your lap when you are sitting having cake and coffee in the courtyard. Always make your departures and home-comings low key so that Deeper doesn't feel the need to become anxious when you leave, or over-excited when you arrive.

Ensuring that the above areas are under control will help you to establish your leadership and help Deeper to understand where he fits into your family. Remember that to be good leaders you must be

kind and consistent so that Deeper will trust in your leadership. You do not need a large stick to get your point across.