

Key Ideas for Teaching Dogs



Positively reinforce any and all behavior that you want to continue. Reward the behavior you want, ignore or manage the behavior you don't want.

Dogs Do What Works. They obey the laws of learning. That gives you a lot of power because you control the resources: food, access to the outdoors, attention, petting, etc. If jumping up gets attention then your dog will do it. If, on the other hand, you ignore your dog when she jumps up, but pay attention to her when she doesn't, she'll quickly learn that keeping four-on-the-floor is the way to get what she wants.

Small Steps. Help your dog learn. If you rush and assume too quickly that the dog "knows" the behavior you'll be frustrated and your dog will be confused. When asking for more from your dog increase only one criteria at a time; increase distance, time, and distractions separately. Reward all honest efforts by your dog.

Timing Is Everything. This is one of those "dog trainer's secrets" that is really quite simple. Dogs are "in the moment" animals, so it's important to make your response "in the moment" as well. The moment you see your dog do something you like, acknowledge it. Don't wait! Don't hesitate! Praise, reward, smile, as soon as you notice. This is essential when teaching dogs new behaviors that they're unsure of. The same goes for those times when your dog is doing something you don't like, don't wait for it to get worse before you respond.

Ham It Up! Bring out your inner actor and you'll see a difference in your dog because your intent will be clearer. Delight and disappointment shouldn't look or sound the same. Mushy communication from you makes for mushy responses from your dog.

"Say please." Dogs will do something you want in order to do something they want. For example, having your dog sit before you open the door, or before you put his food bowl down, is an easy way to improve their behavior. This is a very powerful idea that all owners should make use of, and it is an essential part of creating a healthy home environment where dogs need structure and tasks.

Positive Does Not Equal Permissive. Positive Training doesn't mean that the dog gets to do whatever she wants. It means being fair and not punitive, anticipating instead of just reacting, and valuing your dog's efforts. Be consistent and your dog will reward you.

Be Proactive. Focus on setting your dog up for success, not on catching them in failure. Remember, you're the human, you can plan for your dog.

Forgive Forgetting. We all know that forgetting is part of learning. Dogs (and people!) need help when they forget, and it's your responsibility to turn these moments into learning opportunities.

Have Fun! As far as the dog is concerned there's no difference between "obedience" and "tricks." It's all a game to them, so why not take the same attitude. If you make a mistake just let it go and try again. Be fair, be enthusiastic, and enjoy this time with your dog.