

Let's not dwell on the unhappy endings that millions of dogs face each year in this country...

Let's focus on what you can do to keep your life with your dog happy and trouble free.

FACT #1: Dogs base their decisions on what is pleasing or rewarding for them.

Dogs basically spend each day trying to find gratification in life. When they hit on something that provides pleasant consequence, they will make a conscious effort to try to repeat that behavior, and thus reap the reward, as often as possible. This is a basic law of nature and psychology. Any organism with a brain will repeat those actions or behaviors which are rewarded.

So, your dog "hangs out" all day, waiting for you to notice and reward some behavior he is performing. He tries sitting quietly, and it goes unrewarded. He switches to another behavior, like grabbing your shoe, or yapping, and BINGO! That gets your attention.

Now your dog has the information he was seeking, on which to base his choices. Sitting quietly, not eating shoes does not get rewarded. Being disruptive often earns the attention of the family. Sometimes it even ends up in a game of "chase" with much "cheering." Which behavior do you think your dog will learn to prefer?

Dogs are not innately bad. They are performing the behaviors they have learned to prefer, based on consequences. They are choosing the "bad behaviors" because you have taught them to prefer the bad behaviors with your attention.

A bored dog goes to the trash can, where he smells food. He raids the trash can, eating anything from fish guts to dirty baby diapers, thinking he has found the "lost gold." You can scold all you want, but if you have allowed the dog to experience a positive reward by raiding the garbage and getting all of its delights, how can you ever expect the dog to try to not raid the garbage?

Here's the irony of the situation. While the dog is acting out his life, waiting for positive things to happen, so that he can make a choice as to whether his actions are productive and worth repeating, or non-productive, here the owner sits doing nothing to help the dog choose the right behaviors by rewarding them.

Instead, you sit at your computer, or in front of your television, completely ignoring the dog. Silently, you wait for the little buggler to do something bad, so that you can punish him. Suddenly, you hear a crash, and the dog flees out the doggie door with your computer disk in his mouth (the one with the important, irreplaceable information on it). You stop ignoring the dog and dash into the backyard, chasing him for 45 minutes while he plays keep away. You catch up with him and give him a good scolding, thinking you are punishing him.

Now, his favorite toy is a computer disk, and you don't understand why. The dog is going to look for every opportunity to drag you away from your mundane activities to engage you in 45 minutes of exercise and undivided attention.

Can you see the irony? You can't expect your dog learn to choose good manners based on what is punished and what is not punished. A training system based on punishment is not effective for a dog, whose choices are based on what is rewarded and what is not rewarded.

FACT #2: Dogs are amoral. They have absolutely no sense of what is right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable in our world.

You haven't adopted a naughty dog-- you've trained him to perform each one of those bad behaviors.

You see, a dog has no way of knowing which behaviors YOU think are good, and which you think are bad. The dog is not a mind-reader. And, you're confusing him if you're doing nothing to reward the good behaviors (the absence of bad behaviors), and are inadvertently rewarding the bad ones. YOU are causing your dog to make all of the wrong choices.

Now we know why so many people have "bad" dogs.

But you can avoid this training pitfall...

Since dogs base their behavior choices on perceived favorable consequences, it becomes every dog owner's responsibility to make sure that the desired behaviors are followed with favorable consequences. That's ALL you have to do to be a good dog trainer. It can't get any easier than that.

The main problem with inexperienced dog trainers is that they aren't sure WHAT exactly to reward, and they aren't sure HOW to reward the behavior.

Here are three examples of behaviors to reward. Act quickly with a treat, because at any moment the dog could switch to a less desirable behavior, which you will not be able to reward.

1. Sitting quietly (not jumping, not barking, not running away, not biting, in general the absence of all of the other "bad" behaviors).

You might say to yourself, "I'm supposed to reward my dog for just sitting there? I don't care what he's doing, as long as he's not getting into things and causing trouble!" Well, guess what? That's what you're rewarding: not getting into trouble. And, you'll see a lot MORE of it, when you start rewarding it.

I remember a man in my obedience class years ago, whose Labrador just wouldn't stop barking the first night of class. He asked me what he could DO about the barking. I told him not to do ANYTHING about the barking. Ignore the barking. I told him to reward those brief moments of silence in between the barking by giving the dog a treat. The man looked at me like I was crazy, but did as I instructed. By the end of that night, the Lab was consistently choosing the behavior that was earning rewards: sitting still and being quiet. He completely abandoned the idea of barking, because it was being ignored (a strong form of punishment for a dog).