

Its All In A Word



It is one task to teach a dog to sit or lie down when asked, and it another task altogether to alter the behaviour of your dog. When dealing with dog issues, it is quite common to hear dog owners seeking help. How to train their dog to stop growling at the mail carrier, or to train their dog not to be feral when in the car, or even to train their dog to not whine when left alone. These are all common areas of concern.

Let's take a look at semantics. *Training* is listed in the dictionary as to teach a specific skill, by practice or improve abilities as the result of instruction.

Looking up the word *behaviour* will show us it means the way one consults oneself...manners, an observable pattern of actions especially in the response to stimuli. Quite different from each other when laid out clearly.

Sit, lie down, come when called are all examples of a specific skill set. They are clear-cut. You can look for an action and reward that action repeatedly. By doing this, you are likely to teach your dog, or train your dog, the desired word. It may also have some bearing on behaviour, depending on how the words are used.

You can use words you have taught in a training session to help sort out perceived behavioural issues. If you have a dog that growls at other dogs that approach, some feel that teaching that dog to lie down will rectify the situation. I have not found this to be the case. This may help the dog owner in that moment, but will not necessarily help in the long run. And it is the long run that we should be concerned about.

You may even find yourself exasperating the issue by covering it up with obedience type training. It is like layers of an onion, being placed over the speed of the problem. Unless the seed is healthy with, at some point the layers of trying will be removed and you will still have a dog with issues that have to be dealt with.

This is where things can get a bit confusing. There is a lot of discussion lately on the use of food in training. For training (or teaching) a word or skill it is a great choice. It clearly defines exactly the word you are looking for. You ask a dog to sit, you lure it into the sit, and treat for the sit. Fairly simple so far. Over time, as your dog becomes more proficient with the word sit, you start to wean down the food. You can then use food mainly for new and improved actions. You start to use the food intermittently. You

can also use food to up the criteria. By asking your dog to sit at a distance, you can reward them for this new behaviour. This is training, or teaching a skill.

Where using food is not always your best option, is with some types of behavioural issues. Dogs who are truly aggressive (not simply reactive) or dogs who suffer from separation anxiety are just a couple of examples of dogs who would do best to establishing a relationship with their people with help from a trainer/behaviourist. Sometimes using food helps modify behaviour, but not always.

I believe there is still some confusion between teaching skills to the dog, and modifying the behaviour of the dog.

Another prime example of this confusion comes when people bring their dogs into a training class. This is a great way to start with your dog, to get you both off on the right food (paw?) and brings a lot of fun the the whole family. The exception to this is if you have a dog with a behavioural issue, which is not addressed in the group class curriculum. Most group training classes for dogs address words your dog needs to increase communication between the two of you. Again, these words can be skills such as sit/down and come or can be more complex skills such as roll over, spin or take a bow, taught in a tricks class.

If you have a dog who lacks social skills, who reacts in a negative fashion towards other dogs, or who is overwhelmed by a group of dogs, attending a training class might not be your first option. This can be disappointing to some dog owners, who had a vision of their pup joining in all the fun. But at this stage of the game, it is far better to discuss with your trainer what your best option is to help your dog. A few skills may help with communication but again, will not address the underlying issue fully.

Once again, going to the dictionary, *relationship* is defined as a kinship, and emotional connection or association. This is what we strive for with our dogs. We want a relationship that is solid, based on trust from both sides. Sometimes the modification and adjustment of your dogs behaviour will be necessary for you to reach this goal. Sometimes it is a matter of teaching Sparky to come when called, and sometimes it is a matter of truly understanding your dog.

There are many options you can consider when you live with a dog that has behavioural issues. Taking a Tricks or Scenting class are great options. Dogs can work in a group setting, but have personal space. This can be lots of fun for everyone, even if learning a sit or down comes a bit later, once the dog starts to feel more comfortable around the other dogs. And if you find your leash reactive dog, and you, need more education and practice there is the option of a Reactive Rover course.

Keep up the good work. Whether you are teaching skills or dealing with a few issues, it is always worth the effort. Your dog will thank you.