

# Down Dog Digest

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## How to teach your dog what you want them to do

The tiny plane chugged across the sky, setting Gus off into a fusillade of barking. "Gus, shush," I said, with little hope of quiet. Because I have not put enough effort or time into training that cue.



Every owner is a dog trainer. You want your dog to do the things you want, so you have to train them. Therefore it's useful to know how dogs learn.

Dogs don't come ready programmed. They don't emerge from their mum knowing where to toilet, not to use their teeth on humans, how to walk nicely on lead or come back when called. You have to teach them.

Even puppies' innate behaviours (eating or drinking) require some learning – how to find the mother's teat, learning where, how and when you get fed in your owners home, and

learning where it's acceptable to eliminate.

We normally use sounds, words, and gestures to teach our dogs. But dogs don't understand English. It's no good simply repeating "sit, sit, SIT" to your dog because they won't understand what you mean. It's no good pulling your dog back to your side with the lead to stop them pulling. You have to teach them how you want them to behave.

We all have to learn. You weren't born knowing how to cook meals. You've learnt skills throughout your life – how to add up, how to read and write, how to use the myriad of gadgets without which our lives are deemed incomplete. Even the simple things like getting dressed, tying shoelaces or answering a phone have to be learnt.

Dogs learn things easily. And they are learning all the time. Where the comfiest place to sleep is, where the best smells are on walks, who is the most fun to play with, where their food is stored – every dog I've ever known will magically appear when you open 'that' cupboard door.

The overall aim should be that your pup learns that you are a wonderful person to be with and you will protect them and provide them with fun, comfort, and entertainment so they don't look elsewhere for those things.

From the moment you bring your new puppy home, you need to teach them how to live in harmony with you. Let's use housetraining as an example - your puppy needs the opportunity to

# How to teach your dog what you want

go outside; they need the motivation to do so if it's cold and raining; they need to be physically able to go down the steps or up onto the lawn; and they need lots of repetition (practice) day after day if they're going to learn to eliminate outside rather than in the house.

What is learning? It's defined as "the act or process of acquiring knowledge or skill."

How do you know when a dog has learnt something?

You can only tell if your dog has learnt something by their behaviour – asking to be let out to toilet, walking nicely on lead, chewing their toys instead of you or your home, and coming when you call.

We recommend you monitor learning using the 95% rule, by which I mean, if you ask or set up your dog to perform a behaviour 20 times, your dog does it quickly, first time of asking, 19 times out of 20.

For example, let's take sit. I'd use a lure method to teach – because it's easiest and works quickly. A food reward held just above your dog's head and moved a little further upwards usually produces the desired behaviour.



After three successful attempts, I'd drop the food lure and use just a hand signal, adding the cue "Sit", praising the dog for the response then producing and giving a treat.

Gradually I'd move the hand signal away from the dog, and I'd give the cue first once I'm pretty sure the dog will respond. Once the dog

is responding well, I would only give a reward for the very best responses (perhaps the best 30%) to develop fluency.

Then I'd generalise it - which takes the most thought, organisation and time. For everything you teach your dog, you need to train for three things:

**Distance:** teaching your dog to do that thing no matter how far away from you they are

**Duration:** to keep doing that thing until you release them or do a different thing, and

**Distractions** – the biggest barrier (and opportunity!) for learning.

A good rule of thumb is to teach the behaviour in at least five different situations and environments for the light bulb to come on and for the dog to understand they should react to that cue anywhere and everywhere.

One very common problem is the owner who has taught their dog to sit – but only when they are standing in front of the dog looking directly at the dog. The dog has learnt that when their owner says "sit" if the dog moves and sits in front of the owner, they get a reward.

That's why we plead with our clients to practice everything they learn during their walks. You can practice just about anything on a walk. From the basic control positions, to waits, stays, settle, recall, walking nicely on a loose lead, leave it, even husbandry skills and distance control.

Skills get rusty when they aren't practised. Unless you set aside time for training your dog, it can be difficult to fit it in to our busy lives.

Practice produces progress.

Ideally you want to train your dog so that when you ask for a behaviour, the dog does it almost without thinking – it becomes a subconscious reaction to respond.

Just like driving a car – once you've learnt how to drive and had a few years of practice, you do it almost without thinking.



# Learning by observation

Your dog watches you – all the time.

They learn our patterns and what actions predict others. If the same pattern of events happens regularly, dogs will learn that pattern.

Dogs learn initially from observing their mother and littermates as well as their human carers.

They will also learn from each other – though they often learn behaviours you don't necessarily want, such as jumping on the settee and barking at passers-by through the window.



The problem with this type of learning is that you can't always direct it – you can only control it.

That's part of the reason why pups from a mother who alarm barks and is fearful will also show those behaviours. And it's why controlling adolescent dogs' access to rough play with other dogs is so important.

I'm off to do some "quiet" training with Gus – long overdue! What do you want to train your dog to do? If you aren't sure how to do it, ask us for help.

# The four stages of learning

There are four key stages when you or your dog learn anything.

The first stage is gaining knowledge.

The second stage is about gaining fluency, where behaviours become automatic.

The third stage is perhaps the most difficult – generalising the learning, so that the behaviour happens anywhere and everywhere.

The fourth stage is about maintaining the behaviour at the required level through practice.

Think about learning to drive a car. First you have to learn each movement – turning the wheel, selecting a gear, releasing the clutch or moving the automatic selector, pressing the brake and so on – the acquiring stage.

Next you learn to put these things together without having to think about each movement – that's fluency, where it becomes automatic.

Then you have to learn to drive on narrow country roads, in busy town centres and on wide

motorways, applying your skills in different situations – that's generalisation.

And finally, you become practised and skilled, able to drive easily – sometimes even driving without full awareness – that's maintenance.

These stages apply to all learning – children learning their multiplication tables; learning a foreign language; drawing cartoons; using the internet; cooking; or painting pictures; everything we do (our behaviours) requires some element of learning.

Similarly with dogs.

Your pup will learn some things quickly – things like sit or give a paw, because they are simple behaviours that dogs do naturally.

Behaviours that are not natural and work against your dog's natural instincts, such as walking on a loose lead, or recall, are much harder to teach. But patience, time and practice will produce progress!

# Carol's Challenge

In each newsletter I'm going to set you a challenge.

My challenge this month is: to set yourself SMART goals in your training.

SMART is a useful acronym that stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable (or attainable), Realistic (or relevant), and Time-based.



A SMART goal helps to focus your efforts and increase your chances of achieving that goal.

Using sit as an example, a SMART goal might be:

"I'll teach my dog:

- to put his bottom on the floor 19 times out of 20 within one second of my cue (specific)
- and keep it there until I release him (measurable)
- anywhere at home and in my garden (achievable and relevant)
- by Friday (time based)."

A second SMART goal might then be:

"I'll teach my dog:

- to put his bottom on the ground 19 times out of 20 within one second of my cue (specific)
- and keep it there until I release him (measurable)
- when he's on-lead beside me at the beach and in the park at quieter times (achievable and relevant)
- by the end of next week (time based).

Another example: "I'll teach my dog:

- to put his bottom on the ground 19 times out of 20 within one second of my cue (specific)
- and keep it there until I release him (measurable)
- off lead at the beach and in the park (achievable and realistic)
- by the end of this month (time based)."

Using SMART goals to plan out your training helps you have clarity about what you want by when and how you will do it.

What will your SMART goal be? Use the examples above or set your own goals.

You can set SMART goals for everything you want to train, then plan it all out in a sensible timetable for each day.

You'll be amazed at how much your training improves and how quickly your dog will learn.

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We hope you've enjoyed this Down Dog Digest.

Please feel free to share it with any friends, neighbours or family members you think might find it interesting.

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