

How Dogs Learn Part 1



INFO

Learning by association

Humans learn by association too. When you meet someone for the first time you come away with an impression—an association, positive, negative or neutral. If you enjoyed the interaction you are highly likely to be happy to see them again. If however you found the person difficult, you might get that little pit of dread in

your belly when you see her again—you made a negative association with her.

Dogs experience the world this way too, they constantly form emotional associations—safe, dangerous, neutral or good for me, bad for me, neutral. These associations then influence the decisions dogs make and the reactions they have to various situations and things in their environment.

For example many dogs seem to love their food bowl, pull the right bowl out of the cupboard and the average dog will jump into fits of joy. This is because dogs have come to learn that this particular bowl always predicts mealtime. Food is good and tasty, so we love food bowls—I mean who doesn't?

The really amazing thing is that we can manipulate dogs' associations to things. New puppies generally find leads inconsequential, when first shown a 6 foot length of nylon with a clip at the end they don't think much of it at all. But find a way to make a dog associate anything with something he loves and you can teach him to love that thing too. Clip the lead on and give him treats, or take him for a walk. Every time you put the lead on, take him for a walk or give him treats until you take the lead off. Pretty soon the puppy figures out that the lead means good stuff and now you have a dog that loves the lead.

The frightening thing is that learning by association also works against us if we aren't careful. You can teach a dog to hate or fear leads by repeatedly using them to give corrections or tie him up outside on his own if he finds that scary.

What does this mean for us?

The implications are pretty huge. Everything you do around your dog influences the associations he makes. For the good, or the bad.

Say I'm walking my dog and I don't like the way he reacts to seeing another dog. Maybe he barks in excitement, but I don't like it. I shout, "No!" and jerk his lead. This happens every time we see a dog. Pretty soon, my dog's reaction to other dogs is even worse—he barks and growls and lunges and snaps because other dogs equal pain and an angry human. I have taught my dog to dislike or fear other dogs.

This is the main drawback of using punishment—it has unintended side effects. It can build negative association with the person doing the punishing, affecting the bond between human and dog. It is not that punishment doesn't work, it is that learning by association always comes along for the ride.



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A dog's view of the world

So, dogs see things in terms of what is safe/good for me vs. what is dangerous/bad for me.

When dogs get punished for peeing on the carpet in front of you, they don't learn inside/outside, they learn it is not safe to pee in front of you, it's safer to pee when you aren't there.

Why should we care?

If we expect our dogs to be able to cope with all that modern life can throw at them we need to teach them that the world is safe, that unexpected things can happen and that's OK.

The easiest way to do this is with a young puppy and making sure that as we take them about in their environment that they are having fun and are confident at all times. An easy way to make a puppy think that everything is awesome is to add treats to the equation. So a big noisy truck goes past—treats appear. A kid on a skateboard whizzes close by—treats happen. A person wearing a big hat bends over them and pats them on the head—treats happen!

Many adult dogs may have missed out on seeing some of the weird and wonderful things of their world during their puppyhood, or they may have made poor associations with things already. We can still help them out by the same sort of process. By giving them distance from what is worrying them and then pairing the appearance of the scary thing with special treats or games we can change their world view somewhat and help them feel more confident and positive about things. This is not rewarding our dog for poor behaviour; his emotions mean he isn't really in control of how he is acting so we concentrate instead on changing those emotions and the behaviour will change as a consequence of him feeling better.

A dog who is confident in his environment is then able to learn more easily and we can then teach him how we'd like him to act at home, and when out and about.



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