

Dog Behaviour Explained 2

4. Does reassuring a frightened dog reinforce that behaviour?

Reinforcement of a behaviour is an Operant Conditioning principle which applies to responses which are under the dogs conscious control and dependent on the consequences to a behaviour. Anxiety and fear are emotions which are involuntary. They are conditioned or changed through Classical Conditioning processes. You cannot make a dog scared by rewarding him!

Where dogs show anxiety or fear, there are two options depending in the severity of the reaction:

- 1) Carry on as normal, neither asking the dog to approach or ignore the cause of fear, and give them time to accept and adapt normally. If necessary give some support and reassurance and allow them to explore what was causing them fear and realise it isn't a threat (habituation).
- 3) With more severe reactions (or if the cause of fear is a real threat), remove the dog as quickly as possible to prevent further sensitising and then if it is necessary for the dog to learn to cope with the situation, determine a plan to gradually get the dog to be able to accept the situation using systematic desensitisation and counter conditioning techniques.

5. You can't teach an old dog new tricks?

One of the reasons dogs have been so successful in their domestication and ability to live with humans is their trainability (as well as their ability to form emotional connections across multiple species simultaneously, which is actually a rare quality in the animal kingdom). Old dogs can be taught new tricks, if appropriate methods are used (and assuming they is no cognitive decline or they are physically unable to comply). One of the most important things to teach a dog is how to learn – not just obeying commands but able to problem solves and work out for themselves which behaviour is most appropriate in different situations. Whilst luring behaviour and rewarding is a simple way to train dogs, dogs which have been more actively engaged in their training through using methods such as shaping will find future learning easier. Where dogs have had little previous training, they may have to first unlearn their usual responses first and learn how to learn, so it can be slower with these dogs to start with, but it can still be achieved with patience and good techniques.

6. Are dogs carnivores?

Dogs are actually omnivores, they are adapted to be able to live on a flexible and varied diet of both meat and plants. They are predominantly scavengers, not hunters, and therefore have relatively weak jaws and small teeth compared to true carnivores. (Dogs kill prey by tearing and bleeding to death, unlike cats who crush windpipes).

As an omnivore they are able to synthesise many essential nutrients including amino acids (precursors of proteins) unlike cats or true carnivores. They also have no requirement for carbohydrates as they are able to synthesis their glucose requirement from dietary fat and protein.

Next time, we will be answering:

Should dogs should be told of for growling?

Will training prevent or treat behaviour problems?

Are dogs are pack animals?