

Dog Behaviour Explained

19. Do dogs feel guilty when they have done something wrong?

Dogs do experience the full range of primary emotions e.g. joy, anger, sadness, excitement, contentment, distress and love. But they are unlikely to feel complex emotions such as guilt, pride, contempt, shame and jealousy which require a cognitive input. Being able to feel guilty would mean dogs would have to be able to make a moral judgement about whether something was right or wrong. This is not likely, but even if it was, they would be unlikely to judge some of things we don't want them to do as morally wrong when they are perfectly normal dog behaviour!

However, many owners will tell you their dog looks guilty and knows when he has done something wrong. A better explanation from this is that the dog is showing appeasement signals in an attempt to reduce conflict and punishment from their owners, when they either know from previous learning or our body language, that these are situations where we may be angry with them.

20. Does repeating commands help your dog learn?

Whilst it is true that dogs learn through repetition, this means repetition of correct and rewarded responses! Dogs first have to learn what words mean by them being associated with actions. Giving commands that the dog doesn't understand or can't do, weakens the association and makes training ineffective. Repeating commands to which the dog does not respond teaches the dog to ignore you or worse associate the commands with the wrong behaviour e.g. calling your dog whilst he runs away! The owner risks becoming white noise, nagging and getting no response. Dogs respond better to body language and visual signals than words, and these must be followed with positive consequences to ensure the dog will want to cooperate in future. Work first on getting the behaviour, though luring or shaping, repeat and reward correct responses and only finally label the behaviour and then ask for the behaviour by cue.

21. Do dogs dream?

Dogs' brain structure and wave patterns are very similar to our own and they have similar stages of electrical activity when sleeping. It is very likely that they do dream, and most owners observing their dogs sleep will see their legs twitching, snarls and hear barks / growls and as if they are dreaming. There is evidence in simpler animals that that do dream and that those dreams are about experiences during the day and this helps with the learning process. If they can dream, our dogs surely must too. My dog always seems to have the most active dreams when he has had a busy day, possibly indicating he has more to process.

Next time, we will be answering:

Does neutering reduce aggression in male dogs?

Should training should be completed in the first 6 months?

Do dogs understand what their owners say?