

Kelly Krager

From: Aidan, Positive Petzine [editor@positivepetzine.com]
Sent: Wednesday, September 26, 2007 12:23 PM
To: Kelly Krager
Subject: [positivepetzine] Do dogs know when they've been naughty?

Hi Kelly, do dogs like Sophie know when they've done something wrong?

Dogs who have been punished before for something often give the impression that they 'know' they have done something wrong. So what does this really mean, when have they really learned not to do something, and how will it help you with training?

Dogs who are punished will often display what behaviorists call '**avoidance behavior**' or '**appeasement behavior**'. They very quickly learn how their owner behaves prior to dishing out a punishment, and will display this avoidance or appeasement behavior before the punishment even commences.

Many dog owners interpret this as proof that the dog "knew" what he did was wrong. Unfortunately for both dog and owner, this is a misunderstanding. Why unfortunate? The owner thinks his dog is deliberately being naughty, and the punishments can escalate. What's more, the owner now believes that the dog is simply being disobedient, and can fail to take a course of effective behavior management or training.

A dog will demonstrate that punishment has been effective when the punished behavior stops. Whether the dog knows it is 'wrong' or not is not something we can really 'know' at this stage in our evolution - after all, dogs can't talk and we can't read minds.

An example - one dog owner complained that his dog was escaping from his yard. The owner had heavily scolded the dog for this behavior in the past, as his last dog was run over and killed after escaping from the yard. Now the dog would cringe when returning from his outings. To confuse the issue even more, when a third party told the owner that his dog had been seen outside the yard, the dog again cringed, picking up the subtle signs that his owner was angry and upset. Dogs are very attuned to this sort of thing.

The dog had learned what to look for when a scolding was about to come. He had also learned that returning to the yard resulted in a scolding. He did not learn to stay in the yard at all, had he learned this he would not have escaped. We only know that a punishment is effective if the behavior stops.

The owner escalated scoldings to the point of physical abuse, desperate not to lose another dog on the road. He believed that his dog knew that leaving the yard was 'wrong', because his dog cringed when he returned. With this belief firmly in the owner's mind, it didn't make sense to take more effective action such as installing a better latch on the gate and a spring to automatically shut the gate when visitors forgot to shut it. He was blinded to these more sensible and effective options, because he truly believed that his dog already 'knew' not to leave the yard.

I can only feel sorry for this dog and his owner. Yet another of this poor fellow's dogs will probably be lost, stolen or run over by a car and I know that he genuinely has a deep love for his dogs. Unfortunately, he was convinced that his dog 'knew' he had done something wrong and was therefore only being disobedient.

Even if his dog *did* know that he had done something wrong, the scolding was clearly not effective as the dangerous behavior continued unabated. Why bother? There are better options, such as improving fencing and gates, providing environmental enrichment by way of toys or treat-balls, and taking daily walks on-lead.

Until next time...

Regards,
Aidan
Editor

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