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## Your Smart Dog *Five Reasons Your Dog Doesn't Listen* November 2009

**H**as this ever happened to you? Your well-behaved dog loses all his skills when you take him outside the house? Your perfect dog suddenly forgets how to sit? He jumps on people? He doesn't come when you call him? Forgets his own name?

**You're not alone.** One of the most common questions I'm asked is "Why does my dog act so dumb in public?" My answer, as you might guess, isn't black and white. This month we'll talk about five reasons your dog might not be able to do what you ask.

**It doesn't do you much good if your dog listens beautifully only when no one's around.**

### **DOG DOESN'T REALLY KNOW THE BEHAVIOR**

**Sorry, to be the bearer of bad news, but that means, in a nutshell, that you haven't done your job.** You went to dog class with your dog, you taught your dog to come when called in class, and you even practiced at home! So why does Fido run the other direction when you call him? Because you stopped teaching him too soon.

Maybe in class, the dog had no other option but to come to you. He's on a leash the whole time – where else is he going to go? What looks like a trained behavior isn't really.

**Instead of berating the dog, just practice some more.** Go back to your quiet, boring, familiar territory and start again. Start to add in variations: maybe jump up and down when you call your dog. Stand sideways and call. Wear sunglasses and call your dog. Wear a hoodie. Sit. Stand. Lean against

the wall. Try to shake things up a little bit – try not to look predictable. You want the dog to realize that it doesn't matter what you look like, it's his actions that count.

### **DOG WASN'T TAUGHT IN THAT LOCATION**

**Many times, you'll practice in class and at home, but then when you're at the park, you give the cue for the behavior and the dog looks at you like you're speaking Japanese.** Dogs are *contextual learners*. They are very poor generalizers. What this means is that **if you want your dog to do the behavior in the park, teach that behavior to your dog in the park.** Want your dog to do it when you're on the C & O Canal? Teach the behavior at the C & O Canal. Want your dog to sit at the door when the doorbell rings? Teach the dog to sit by the door and ring the doorbell during the lesson. You can't change the circumstances and expect the dog to "get it."

**You're dog isn't dumb – he's brilliant! He knows the consequences and he doesn't think much of them.**

### **DOG DOESN'T KNOW HOW TO DEAL WITH DISTRACTIONS**

**It doesn't do you much good if your dog listens beautifully only when no one's around.** You'd really like your dog to be able to comply when it's crazy – the doorbell is ringing, the kids are yelling, and dinner's cooking. If you teach your dog only in quiet, distraction-free locations, your dog will only be able to perform in quiet, distraction-free locations.

**How many geometry homework problems could you help your kids with if you were on stage at a rock concert? Would it help you concentrate if I**



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said “Hey! Just look at the book! Concentrate! It’s not that hard!” Probably not much. But that’s what we typically do to our dogs when they don’t pay attention to us. We think they’re “blowing us off,” or we call them “stubborn.” Truth is, the dog is neither blowing you off or being stubborn. It’s just too hard to concentrate on the task at hand.

#### BEHAVIOR DOESN’T PAY OFF

**Your dog may have learned that coming when called, especially when they’re having fun, means the fun is over.** The longer your dog can play keep-away from you, the longer his fun lasts. Why on earth would he be eager to return to you if you put him in the car and take him home? Away from his doggie buddies? Away from the romp in the woods? Your dog isn’t dumb – he’s brilliant! He knows the consequences and he doesn’t think much of them.

#### OVERWHELMED SYNDROME

**Many dogs shut down when they’re overwhelmed.** It looks like your dog isn’t listening, even to the simplest requests. **It’s not that he isn’t listening, it’s that your dog can’t comply.** Take a look at your dog. Is your dog panting? Can you see the whites of his eyes? Is he stand-offish? Hiding behind you? Where is his tail? (A droopy or tucked tail is a sure sign that a dog is overwhelmed.)

**To see if your dog is overwhelmed, remove him from the situation.** Take him 100 feet away from the location and ask him to do a simple behavior. Can he do it? If so, he may simply have been too overwhelmed to comply when you asked earlier.

I’ve identified five reasons your dog doesn’t listen to you. **Next time your dog doesn’t do what you ask, think about these five things and try to identify which of these circumstances are at play.**

**Next month we’ll talk about solutions to these five situations. Until then, happy training!**

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