

Your Smart Dog

Why Does My Dog Do That?!

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I got a call last week from someone who recently adopted a young Labrador. **She really enjoyed the dog, for the most part, but there were a few annoying habits she wanted to change.** One was the (very natural) behavior of sniffing crotches. While people find that behavior embarrassing, it's a natural dog behavior.

Many people seek professional help because their dog is displaying troublesome or annoying behavior. A question I'm routinely asked is "Why does my dog do that?" Generally, the answer is as simple as: because he's a dog and that's what dogs do. **Most nuisance behaviors that owners want stopped are natural behaviors for the dog, and the dog just hasn't learned to do anything different.**

Natural dog behaviors and breed-specific behaviors are generally at the root of most nuisance behaviors that owners want to change. Understanding this will hopefully help you realize that your dog isn't being stubborn, spiteful, lazy or stupid...despite what it looks like!

Dogs that have been bred for specific purposes usually exhibit specific behaviors – that sometimes owners find annoying. These behaviors can be difficult – but not impossible – to overcome.

Any behavior your dog exhibits happens because it is being (or has

been) reinforced. The behavior may have started because of an inborn drive, as a response to something in the environment (the other dog barked first!), or as a result of an opportunity too good to pass up (who left the hamburger on the coffee table?). **The behavior continues because of the power of reinforcement.**

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Behaviors are reinforced, and thereby maintained, in several ways:

- A behavior can be intrinsically rewarding (for example: behaviors that are fun and/or physiologically rewarding, such as chewing).
- A behavior can be reinforced by reactions from the environment (for example: a dog barks at the mailman and feels successful when the mailman leaves, or the dog chases the cat – cat runs = great fun!).
- A behavior can be owner reinforced intentionally or unintentionally (for example: touching and talking to a dog when he jumps on people).

Utilizing the science behind the clicker method, Smart Dog University's (SDU) approach involves finding out what the dog owner wants the dog **to do** and creating a plan to cause the desired behavior to occur,



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while allowing the undesirable behavior to extinguish. This is very different from the old-fashioned training approach of focusing on the problem and trying to fix it by suppressing the undesirable behavior, often through the use of punishment.

The SDU approach begins by asking the owner to:

1. describe the existing behavior
2. describe the desired behavior
3. create a training plan to help get there.

Developing a training plan (the last step, above) is where a quality positive-reinforcement trainer can really help you get your dog on track.

In some cases, the dog's behavior can be managed to prevent the undesired behavior. This doesn't actually teach the dog what to do, but it can be useful in some situations. Management can be used to help speed up the training process by preventing the inappropriate behavior while we replace that behavior with something more desirable. (See July 2007 article on the [Secret to Speedy Training](#).)

Management "buys time" so you can then teach the dog the skills he needs in order to behave appropriately.

So, back to my client with the crotch-sniffing Labrador. Ok, so it's a natural behavior, but how to stop it?! Let's come back to this question: *What do we want the dog TO DO?* Not sniffing crotches isn't a good enough answer, we need a concrete behavior for the dog to INSTEAD of the crotch sniffing. So how about this: we'd like the dog to greet people by touching an outstretched hand.

Behavior continues because of the power of reinforcement.

So our solution is simple: we simply teach the dog to touch his nose to our hand, put that hand-touching on cue (in this case "say hello" would be an appropriate phrase to use, since the dog is in greeting situation), then simply give the cue each time the dog meets a person.

Problem solved! (Yes, it really is that easy!)

Happy Training! Note: If you need help finding a reliable, positive-reinforcement trainer in your area, contact me and I'll help you search.

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