



## Your Smart Dog

### Your Dog Is Always Learning – What Are You Teaching Him?

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Summer's winding down and there's a hint of fall in the air. That means it's BACK TO SCHOOL time! Students young and old are heading back to the classrooms for another year of learning. What does this have to do with your dog, you're wondering? Read on ...

Dogs don't go back to school every year for formal education. Yes, if you enroll in an obedience class, that's considered formal education (and is recommended!), but the truth is that your dog learns regardless of whether or not you're consciously teaching him anything or not. **Your dog is learning every time you are together, so make sure you're teaching him the right things.**

Over the past month, I've heard this refrain from clients again and again "But he only does that with me, not with my husband (or wife.)" Or "he walks great on a leash for him, but pulls me around the block." People think that their dog is pushing their buttons, doing it on purpose, or doing it to make them angry. Plain and simple, the dog's doing it because he's learned that it works.

**Dogs have the mental capacity of about a three-year old child. They don't know right from wrong, but they do know what works and what doesn't work.** If they paw you until you throw the tennis ball for them, then they think that pawing you is part of the process to get the tennis ball thrown. It really is as simple as that, even though we try to make it more complicated and convoluted and try to assign motive and emotion to the animal mind.

Your dog learns from each person with whom he spends time. That's why your dog might behave differently toward you than he does toward another adult in the house, or toward the kids in the house. The dog behaves differently around each person based on what he's learned from him or her. For

consistent behavior toward everyone in the household, it's important that everyone is on the same page and knows not only what behavior is acceptable, but how to fix the behavior that is unacceptable.

If your behavior toward the dog isn't consistent day-to-day, the dog's behavior toward you won't be either. For instance, if sometimes, on a really hectic day, you let the dog pull you down the street while on a walk, he's learning that sometimes it's ok to pull. We, the humans, know that it's allowed only because we're in a hurry and can't deal with the pulling just then, but the dog doesn't know that at all. He just thinks that that's how walking works sometimes. It's not fair to expect the dog to know he's allowed to pull when you're in a hurry, but not allowed to pull when you've got time in your schedule to work with it.

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Think about situations before you react to them. **Your reaction to a behavior is how the dog learns what's acceptable and what's not.** If your dog barks in the crate, and you let him out sometimes (when he's driving you crazy), guess what your dog just learned?! That barking sometimes works, so he'd better try it every time.

If your dog already has some annoying or unacceptable habits, think back to when they first started and try to figure out how they developed.



For example, if the dog jumps on you, but not on your spouse, think about what you do differently than that person. Maybe you slough the dog off with your hands (which to a dog means “play!”), or maybe you pet him sometimes when he jumps, or talk to him in a sweet voice. In other words, what does the other person do differently that gets the message across consistently to your dog that jumping isn’t an acceptable behavior?

You may need to solicit the input of another person to help you figure out what you might be doing that encourages (or at least doesn’t discourage) the jumping. You may be doing something that you aren’t even aware of, but that someone else will be able to notice. Be observant, be mindful, and be consistent. Your dog will thank you for it! Remember – your dog is always learning . . . what are you teaching?!?

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