

HOW DOGS LEARN

Understanding how dogs learn is important when examining and fixing behaviors.



Dogs learn by building associations. For example your dog most likely learned to sit because they got a treat or praise or affection from you. They also learn negative associations as well. For example, a dog who may have been owned by a male who abused the dog may have negative reactions to males because the dog built an association that all males are going to hurt him.

When we are trying to change a behavior, we need to think about what the cause is for the behavior. For example, we often say we want the dog to stop snapping at us, but we don't think about why the dog is snapping in the first place.

The vast majority of dogs prefer flight over fight. They don't want to hurt anyone. If we think about why they feel how they feel, then and only then can we address why something is happening and work to help the dog feel differently about it.

Dogs talk with their bodies and sometimes they need help communicating how they feel. Helping them learn that they have better choices they can make will lead to a happier and calmer dog.

Food is a great motivator for helping a dog build a positive association. There is a treat hierarchy handout that will help you determine what foods will work best for your dog. Any time we are asking a dog to do something we know they are not comfortable with, we need to use higher value foods.

In the unlikely event that your dog is not motivated by food, use whatever your dog responds well to, whether that is a favorite toy, praise, or affection.

Building a partnership with your dog is key. Dogs want to work with people who treat them with love and respect.



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