

cheerfuldogs Canine Education



Why does my dog do that?

Dog owners are often puzzled as to why their dogs dig, chew, bark excessively, mouth or nip, jump or react aggressively towards people, dogs, other animals, objects and noises. There are many sources available on the internet to which you could refer, but here's a quick guide to some of the reasons for these behavioural challenges.

It's important to know that many of these behaviours which we consider as 'problems' are natural behaviours for the dog. It barks to warn, it jumps to greet you, it digs to keep cool, it chews simply because it's enjoyable. Often, these behaviours have been reinforced by the dog's owner (either intentionally or unintentionally) and have become habits.

Often, these habits can be changed with time, patience and the proper training method that's based on a sound understanding of the dog's behaviour. As every dog and owner learns differently, please seek the help of a certified professional trainer or animal behaviourist to devise a suitable training programme to address these challenges.

Barking

Dogs bark in fear, to warn, in play, to guard territory, because it's bored, and often, because it has learnt that barking gets the owner's attention. It's important to understand the cause of your dog's barking in order to apply the right solution to the problem.

Chewing

Chewing is a dog's natural way to find out about its environment. A puppy chews when it's teething as that soothes its gums. Dogs chew because it's relaxing and very often, they chew because they're bored. especially when the owner hasn't provided enough opportunities for mental and physical exercise. The solution to chewing problems is a combination of good environmental management (e.g. keeping forbidden objects out of your dog's reach), rewarding your dog to reinforce chewing on proper chew toys and providing enough physical and mental stimulation through exercise and training games.

Digging

Digging is another natural canine behaviour and some breeds (like the dachshund) are selectively bred to dig (as part of their original function or work). Dogs dig to escape, bury things, hunt, cool down or because they're bored. Understand the cause in order to find the right combination of solutions for the problem.

Jumping

This is one of the most common issues that dog owners have and it's also one that has been very likely reinforced by the owner. A dog jumps up to greet its owner or to get its attention, and often the owner bends down to pat the dog. Or they try to push the dog away, inadvertently turning the situation into a game, that increases the dog's excitement and reinforces the jumping even more. When a dog is a puppy or a small dog, jumping is sometimes tolerated, but it's a different case when the dog grows big. The key to addressing a jumping problem is to never reinforce it in any way.

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Mouthing and Nipping

Just like chewing, nipping and mouthing are ways in which a dog learns to interact with its environment. A puppy learns to inhibit its bite when it plays with its litter mates or when it nips its mother a bit too hard. A puppy that has been nipped a bit too hard, will yelp in pain and stops all play with the 'offending' puppy. The latter then learns to nip with less force. When dogs that haven't learnt bite inhibition interact with humans, they may nip or mouth in play, or to prevent the occurrence of an unpleasant action (e.g. nail clipping). It's important that dogs are taught bite inhibition through training (training that doesn't involve physical punishment) for safety reasons.

Reactivity

Lack of socialisation is one of the main reasons for dogs reacting aggressively or fearfully in a variety of situations. It's preferable to socialise a puppy during the critical developmental period of between 7-16 weeks. However older dogs that were not properly socialised, can also learn to become less reactive through counter-conditioning and desensitisation. Counter-conditioning and desensitisation may be a lengthy process and requires patience, commitment and consistency from the owner. It's important not to use punishment methods to address aggression caused by fear – you should seek the help of a trained professional.

Summary

Our understanding of how a dog learns has come a long way since the earlier training methods that use corrections as the sole or main way to address behaviour problems. While a spank or shout (softly delivered or otherwise) may seem to stop an unwanted behaviour, it has not addressed the issue of **why** your dog had behaved that way. Kinder and positive reinforcement methods that are based on a good understanding of why a dog is doing something, work well in treating most behaviour problems.

The key to addressing a behaviour problem is to prevent it in the first place – by training your dog **before** a problem arises. Please consult a certified professional trainer if you need help with your dog.