

Me And My Dogs

# Four Classifications of Dog Behavior

## The Demanding Dog

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## **Demanding Dogs**

Demanding dogs are attention seeking. Demanding dogs often lack independence and self confidence. They lack social skills and problem-solving skills. They bark, and they bark, and bark and bark. It's the barking that gets these dogs in trouble. Often called request barking, the dog requests or demands food, attention or play and the dog owner complies to make the barking stop resulting in a dog that lack the skills to do things for herself. It can start as a puppy. Puppy problem solving is barking. Owners who are over indulgent or have no tolerance for the noise will solve problems for them whether it is retrieving a toy or resolving conflicts with other dogs. These puppies grow up to be dogs that don't know how to play on their own or with other dogs. Their world is dependent on their owner.

## **Inadvertent Reinforcement**

An accepted definition of a primary reinforcer is something the dog intrinsically likes. This includes, food, attention and exercise. More specifically, running, jumping, pulling, digging, barking and chewing. These are all things dogs really like to do. Sometimes trainers and behaviorists are asked why does my dog bark. The simple answer is because she likes to. Barking in particular can be self rewarding. If the dog barks to make the mailman go away, it works every time, he drops off the mail and leaves, another reinforcement for the dog. These normal behaviors are so strong it may only take a single trial and reinforcement to establish the possibility that the behavior will occur again.

Often problem behavior is maintained on a partial schedule of reinforcement. The longer the dog continues to seek attention more likely the owner will relent and give it to them. All too many dog

owners give in to their dogs out of frustration and desperation. Demanding dogs in particular can drive people crazy. Every time a person picks up the tennis ball and throws it on demand, they are reinforcing the barking and everything else that comes along with it. If on occasion the owner has the determination to out last their dog, there is still a good possibility that the next time they will give in. The reinforcer is so strong the dog will continue trying because getting food, attention, and exercise are very desirable and from the dog's perspective, are worth the effort.

### **Indirect Approach to Behavior Modification**

In instrumental learning we have positive and negative reinforcement and positive and negative punishment. (Positive is giving reinforcement or punishment and negative is taking away reinforcement or punishment.) As we have said, primary reinforcers are things that dogs intrinsically like. An indirect approach to modify the behavior is more psychological than physical. To do this the owner withdraws all attention and shuns the dog. Dogs are highly social animals and they do not like to be ignored. Dog owners who can turn their backs on their dogs, essentially shift the burden of responsibility to their dogs. Domestic dogs depend on their person to provide food, shelter and affection. The dog is the one who needs to be responsible to their owner if they want to know where their next meal is coming from. There is no doubt, they get the message quickly.

Turn your back and walk away from your dog (don't look back) just a few times and your dog will be at your side in no time. A super nanny uses this technique to get children to bed. She gives them hugs and cuddles and walks away. Every time they get out of bed, no talk, no eye contact, just pick them up and put them right back in. This technique works on dogs too. It is amazing how quickly a dog will respond when we break eye contact or isolate them. Dogs do not like to be 'shunned' even for short

periods of time. Turning or walking away is effective in everything from nipping and jumping up to getting them to come. Used correctly, this technique has immediate results.

## **Demanding Dogs**

The irony of demanding dogs is while they are all attention seeking, many of them are object focused more than handler focused. What this means is they will bark and beg for attention but when they are given attention, they often redirect it to toys or the outdoors. Because dog owners have given in to their demanding dogs since they were puppies, they are now dependent on them for all their mental and physical activity. To stop the barking, stop rewarding it with attention or letting them outside and closing the door behind them. *It is better to go outside with them and exercise on a regular basis **before** the barking starts.* High drive dogs are most often guilty of being called demanding when they don't get enough exercise. These dogs need vigorous exercise in the morning and in the evening.

Another major problem with demanding dogs is their lack of independence and problem-solving skills. From an early age these dogs have barked for everything they needed. Instead of teaching young dogs do things for themselves, dog owners who do not know any better find lost toys for them, retrieve balls from hard to get spots and carry them over rough ground and through tight spaces. Often times instead of physical activity they give the dog chew toys, treats or petting. The result is an overweight dog who cannot solve its own problems.

## **Supervised Play**

To solve these problems, demanding dogs should have *supervised play*. This is play that is directed or facilitated by the dog owner. In Bruce Fogel's 1990 Book The Dogs Mind he recommends "We should stimulate the dogs mind in similar ways to those in which it is naturally stimulated, [and] channel this energy into useful activities which he divides into nose work, problem solving, learning and balance." Such activities include finding and retrieving hidden objects, digging for treasure, running, jumping and playing with other dogs. For the demanding dog, it gives them the activity they demand and the problem solving they need. Hunting is not an activity that is limited to the field or in the woods. It can be done in the backyard or even in the house. The process is what is important. Dogs can actively hunt following their noses to find all sorts of objects indoors or outdoors. The activity is self rewarding so it is a primary reinforcer. Dogs like to hunt because it gives them the opportunity to run, jump, dig, bark and chew. If the hunt is outside on a leash they get to pull too!

There are several dog toys available that can be filled with food. To make help make each hunt novel, try getting one for each day of the week. With the dog watching, fill the toy with food. If it is a Kong™ type toy cover the openings with low fat peanut butter or snack cheese. Put your dog out of sight and hide the toy. To make the game more interesting, put a string on the toy and drag it. Start at the point where the dog will begin the hunt. Do loops and turns around the house or the yard to encourage the dog to track the scent. Then hide it near by where the dog can get it themselves. It is okay for the dog owner to help but do not do it for him. Once the dog finds the toy, let them have it. As the dog gets better at the game, make it more difficult. For hunting in the yard or in the woods, get a life size stuffed animal and soak it in chicken or beef broth. Even better, go to the pet store and ask for the shavings from the rodent cages, soak them in water for a few days, drain the water from the shavings then saturate the toy rabbit or squirrel with it, dogs love it!

