

## Positive Reinforcement Training - The Psychology

Before we start training, let's talk about the psychology of a dog and what their thought process is when it comes to behavior. Here are three key points to remember about dog behavior:

1.) **Dogs do not do want to “dominate” us.** Contrary to popular belief, dogs don't do anything to try and “be in control” or “be dominant” when it comes to their relationship with us. This is an outdated theory put forth by an animal behaviorist, Rudolph Schenkel, in 1934, after he observed a wild pack of wolves. Years later, Schenkel retracted his stance on dominance theory, but it remains a steadfast myth in the dog training world.

It is true, however, that dogs, when they interact with other dogs, will establish a social order among themselves, much like humans do when we find ourselves in social groups. But, this “pecking order” is fluid and can change based on the dogs present, location and access to things like resources.

Like most animals, dogs focus their attention on resources and need, rather than social order. They require food, water, shelter, affection and a host of other things in order to live a full and happy life. Since dogs no longer live in the wild and have the choice to find these things on their own, they rely on us to provide it for them. If a dog isn't receiving what it needs, it will often act out in a way that we see as being “bad behavior”. In reality, dogs don't know the rules of the human world—they're dogs—so they have to try things out to see if it gets them what they want.

Take Pepper for example: Pepper is a medium-sized pitbull who is very affectionate toward humans, but isn't really a fan of other dogs. One day, Pepper is taking a leashed walk with her owner out in the park. Another dog owner and her leashed dog are walking toward them. Pepper often growls at other dogs that get too close to her so, when the other dog and her owner get too close, Pepper growls. Pepper continues to growl until the other dog walks by and out of view. Then, as soon as the threat is gone, Pepper stops growling.

To us, this looks like Pepper is trying to be “aggressive” toward the other dog; growling is often incorrectly seen as anger. In reality, what might be happening is that Pepper is afraid of other dogs (she sees them as a threat), so she uses growling to protect herself. Her response is: “I am afraid of this dog in my personal space so I am going to growl because every time I growl, the dog walks away.”

Logically, we know that the other dog is walking away because her and her owner were going to anyway—the owner and her dog were already headed in the opposite direction—but to Pepper, it is her growling that drove away the other dog. So, in her mind, growling is very successful! To her, growling gets her exactly what she wants: the dog to go away.

2.) **Dogs don't intentionally do things just to annoy, irritate or make us mad.** Many owners feel frustrated when their dogs seemingly do things to purposely make them upset. Things like running away from us when they have picked up a sock we are trying to get back, nipping at our hands when they are excited or even ripping up our brand new couch cushions.

Dog behavior is based on needs and value. So, if you look at everything your dog does based on their needs and what they value, it becomes easier to understand why they might do things that we see as “bad behavior” or that we feel they should not be doing.

For example, let's take the dog who picks up a smelly sock and runs off with it, you trailing behind them and yelling to get it back. First, why did the dog take the sock? Its not because

they knew it would annoy you; its because it probably smells great, has a lovely mouth feel and maybe it rips really well. Its a treasure they never get to have so it becomes very valuable.

To a dog, when they have something of value, they will often try to protect it from being taken. So, when they see you running after them and yelling to get it back, they may run away with it and try to keep you from getting it. And, in the meantime, all the flailing around and yelling you're doing ramps up their excitement and encourages them to, in turn, get excited. This may cause them to run and bounce around more than ever!

In the end, the dog is only doing something instinctual that it would do anyway if it was a wild dog. It gets dopamine from the smell of the sock and serotonin from ripping it up. Its need for "feel good" chemicals outweighs your need for it to drop the sock.

3.) **Dogs need a life without fear.** In the wild, dogs will go out of their way to avoid situations that put them in real (or perceived) danger. Fear is a good motivator for dogs to either flee or fight, so it makes a very bad motivator for learning anything other than what to be afraid of. Dogs are very emotional creatures. Like humans, they can feel sad, happy, angry and, of course, fearful. So, it is our responsibility to treat our dogs in the same way we would want to be treated when we are learning something new or unlearning a bad habit.

**It is very important in your journey through training that you never strike or hurt your dog in any way. Do not force them to perform any action and always allow your dog to have bodily autonomy.**

**Training is about teaching your dog to make good choices, not about forcing them to do things because you want them to.**