

INSANITY!

When Your Dog Goes Nuts

To change undesirable behaviors, train your dog—don't let her train you. **BY DAVIA SILLS**



Do not allow your dog to mark his territory at home by urinating inside.

We experience great frustration and upset when our dogs develop undesirable habits, like jumping on people to greet them. What many people don't realize is that, much of the time, they've been unintentionally training the dog to do exactly what they don't want them to do. Dogs are smart. They don't pick up bad habits for no reason. Often, those undesirable behaviors have been intermittently reinforced with rewards, especially food, attention or even affection. To change the behavior, humans first need to learn how to stop reinforcing it, and then reward the behavior they want to see. Here are four of the most common behaviors that drive dog owners crazy—and how to encourage positive habits instead.

THE PULLER

One of the greatest challenges that dog owners face is training their dog to walk nicely along with them without pulling on the leash. Pat Marshall, dog trainer and owner of Happy Hounds Training Center, elaborates: "They want to go faster than we do. Unless we teach them that the only way to go forward is to walk with us, there's always going to be that disconnect."

THE FIX Christina Shusterich, dog behavior expert and owner of NY Clever K9, tells people to avoid aversive measures like choke collars, because they're temporary, and "the only thing they do is when [the dog] messes up, you choke him, and then you're doing that for the rest of your life." The key is convincing the dog that the only way he can keep going forward and exploring is if he goes with his owner, not ahead of his owner. When the dog starts pulling on the leash, Marshall tells dog owners to stop, and then turn around and go in the opposite direction, so the dog realizes that pulling doesn't take them where they want to go. Over time, they start walking more nicely beside the owner with a short but loose leash.

THE BEGGAR AND THE PAWER

"Looking cute is a way to manipulate the owner because we all respond to it; we all reinforce it with attention," warns Shusterich. Many dogs take advantage of this to get what they want, from scraps from the dinner table to extra treats or pets. Two of the most common behaviors are "begging"—where a dog hovers near the table and looks at a person, sometimes whining or barking or even nudging them, in hopes of a taste of their food—and "pawing."

THE FIX Dogs beg and paw because it works. You reinforce such behavior by giving them what they want. The first step is to stop reinforcing the undesirable behavior. Don't feed the dog. Don't pet him or make a great show of affection. Don't even look at him; the dog will only change his problem behavior when humans totally ignore it, asserts Shusterich. In the case of begging, restrict the dog's access to the table by using a gate. Shusterich recommends redirecting the dog's attention with a toy, such as a chew toy that can be filled with treats and even frozen to sustain a dog's attention.

THE COUNTER-SURFER

When tasty human treats are left out on a counter or low table, it's like a giant neon sign telling a dog to steal them. Called counter-surfing, this behavior is particularly difficult to train, because the dog is rewarded with delicious food he wouldn't otherwise get to eat.

THE FIX Don't keep food out. Make sure it's safely put away in containers, at least while the dog is learning not to jump up on tables and counters. Marshall encourages her students to put everything up high, as if they were baby-proofing the house: "When you have a young dog, it's like having a toddler around, and you want to try to prevent as many problems as you can while you're training." She recommends that dog owners teach their canine friends by walking toward a counter with something tempting and using the command "leave it," which, Marshall adds, basically means "If you don't go for something you want and come back to me, I'll reward you for it." Once dog owners start thinking in terms of reinforcing the behaviors they want to see, they'll observe remarkable progress.

THE OVEREAGER JUMPER

Dogs naturally get excited when a visitor comes over, leading them to bark and jump up on guests. While some guests take this in stride, others may be frightened or physically unbalanced. Many dog owners are upset when their dog jumps on visitors, but often they've been training these bad manners without realizing it. How many times has that same person come home at the end of a long day to their dog jumping up on them and acting excited? Odds are, they were delighted and rewarded the dog with pets and attention, so "how is the dog supposed to understand the difference? It's impossible," says Shusterich.

THE FIX Fight the urge to make a grand entrance, and just be calm when you enter the house. Then take the dog outside right away without letting him jump. Marshall recommends a training exercise where the owner stands inside the door holding the dog on a leash, while another family member walks in; when the dog goes crazy, that person simply turns and walks back out. 🐾