

Say "No" to 'No'

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We've all done it. Our dogs do something annoying and our first reaction is to shout "NO!" That's because we're human – words come easy to us and we assume they are understood equally well by all creatures. But have you ever considered how effective – or ineffective saying "NO!" may really be? What is it you are trying to achieve when you say "NO!" and is there a better way?

"NO!" is Reactive Training

Let's look at the last question first. What is it you are trying to achieve when you say "NO!". Is it to stop your dog from doing something you'd rather it didn't do? This is a REACTIVE training – waiting for your dog to make a mistake and then punishing him for it. Learning theorists tell us animals learn best when we set them up for success so that there are lots of opportunities to reward good behaviour – this is a proactive way of training. Reactive tactics such as shouting 'NO!' may be used as an emergency measure to prevent a single behaviour from occurring but should never be a major part of a training plan for several reasons.

1. "NO!" – has no concrete meaning.

What does "NO!" mean? Even for humans it is hard to define. The effectiveness of "NO!" – if any – is more likely caused by startle and an aversive tone in your voice rather than an understanding that "NO!" means I would like you to stop that particular behaviour now. You could probably yell '17' or 'rhubarb' and have a similar effect. To give "NO!" a clear meaning, it must be followed by a consequence (see using a No Reward Mark below). In many cases "NO!", especially when used frequently, becomes an annoying chant that dogs have learned to ignore.

2. "NO!" does not define the behaviour you DO want.

"NO!" does not tell the dog what we do want him to do. Consider this scenario - Your dog is playing happily in the park when he gets excited and starts jumping up on people. You start to shout "NO!" repeatedly. Finally he comes over to you and starts jumping on you too as you continue to say "NO!" Is it clear that "NO!" means a) you want your dog to stop doing something? and b) what that something is? Is it friendliness toward strangers, running around, coming to you or the jumping up? Would it be clearer if you had said 'sit' rather than "NO!" each time he jumped? It is easy to see how the overuse or poor timing of saying "NO!" can lead to confusion and how much clearer it is to ask your dog TO DO something rather than focus on what NOT to do.

3. "NO!" can effect your dog's desire and motivation to work and diminish the dog/owner bond.

When you were at school did you prefer teachers who yelled "NO!" when you answered a question wrong or the ones who took the time to show you where you went wrong and how to get things right? Did you ever feel like giving up? How did it make you feel about the subject, the teacher and the learning process? Did 'NO!' help you to learn the lessons faster or did it make you lose confidence?

Dogs are not that different from people. Most dogs make mistakes because they don't know what we consider to be 'right' and 'wrong' – not because they are 'dominant', stubborn or disobedient. Top professional and competition trainers accept that it is their responsibility to make sure the animal learns what is 'right' and to do it in a way that will keep the animal motivated to keep playing 'the training game'. As long as your dog wants to 'stay and play the training game' – you can train or retrain anything. Once your animal 'shuts down' – you've lost your ability to achieve anything. That is why good trainers focus on a proactive rather than reactive training plan.



Proactive Training

A proactive training plan involves:

1. Good management so that it is easy for your dog to 'get it right' e.g. restricting access to inappropriate chew toys
2. Defined training goals. You can't train 'good'. It is important to have specific behaviours goals planned for everyday situations e.g. when visitors arrive I will train my dog to sit behind me at the door.
3. Reinforcing desirable behaviour (including passive behaviours such as quiet and settle) with praise or the occasional treat.
4. Teaching your dog what you DO want him to do rather than focusing on what not to do e.g. 'sit' instead of jump.
5. Removal of rewards for undesired behaviour e.g. not allowing access to the kitchen rubbish bin.

A Role for "NO"?

Is there a role for "NO!?" at all? For better or worse humans seem very attached to "NO!" and I doubt it will ever disappear completely. So here are a few hints for the best way to supply 'negative information' when training your dog.

1. Choose a 'No Reward Mark' (NRM)

A 'No Reward Mark' is simply a distinct sound that will tell your dog that the behaviour he is doing will not lead to any rewards – it is a dead end. "NO!" is not an effective NRM as it is too common and used in a wide variety of contexts unrelated to your dog and training. Choose something that will be unique to your dog. Common choices are: 'ah-oh'; 'no way'; 'wrong' or 'too bad'.

2. Give the NRM meaning

You can quickly give meaning to the NRM by playing this simple game. First, teach your dog that one sound means he's earned a treat. Put a treat in your fist. When your dog sniffs your hand say 'yes', 'click' or otherwise mark the fact that your dog has earned a treat and give him the treat. Repeat several times. Next, present an (empty) fist – when your dog sniffs at it say your chosen NRM "too bad" and open your hand to show there is No Reward there. He will soon learn that the NRM precedes behaviours that will not be rewarded.

3. Using the NRM

The NRM is not intended to be intimidating but only to provide feedback that a behaviour will not be rewarded. For example you could say 'ah-oh' as your dog jumps on you followed by the command 'sit'. You are providing extra information that you do not want the jump as well as information that you DO want 'sit'.

NRMs are useful when training behaviours with lots of choices such as correct scent identification. If the dog retrieves the wrongly scented article it is given a NRM and tries again until he retrieves the correct article and is given a reward. This type of training is similar to the children's game where one child helps another find 'treasure' by calling out 'hot' or 'cold'. A click & treat tell your dog he's getting 'hotter' to the right behaviour while a NRM tells him he's getting 'colder' – on the wrong track. A NRM is most useful with confident, food or toy driven dogs who are very motivated to find out 'how to get the cookie!' However as with "NO!", even the gentlest of NRMs can add to frustration and a decrease in motivation with soft natured dogs who lose confidence easily. This is why many trainers still prefer to use positive reinforcement only.

4. Interrupting behaviour

Despite the best laid plans for proactive training there may be times when you need to interrupt a behaviour as quickly as possible. For example, your dog has put his feet up on the kitchen counter and is about to devour tonight's roast. In this case you are likely to move into reactive training or emergency mode and apply what trainers would call an 'interrupting stimulus' – such as a word said with *great emphasis* - your dog's name, your NRM, "NO!" (or



something even more colourful!) , a clap of hands or a stamped foot – anything to stop your dog in his tracks. Assuming this has saved the immediate danger – the next step is to follow through with a constructive instruction such as 'come' or 'sit' and reward the dog for this last behaviour before implementing management techniques to avoid a repeat of the behaviour such as putting the dog outside or asking for a supervised settle on his mat.

What form your 'interrupting stimulus' takes is of less importance than your immediate timing and what follows after. The interrupting sound, though it may have saved the roast this time has not retrained your dog but it has at least:

1. prevented the dog from being rewarded for undesirable behaviour
2. bought you time and opportunity to implement the behaviour you do want.
3. saved your dinner!

Implementing and rewarding the behaviour you want after the event is the crucial step in producing a long term change in behaviour and immediately rebuilds the relationship that may be temporarily damaged with an intimidating shout. Following through with positive reinforcement for correct behaviour makes it clear that it was not the mere presence of your dog but the behaviour that triggered your aversive response.

Training for Life

Dogs share our homes and lives and sometimes we get cross and yell – that's life – after all we're only human! But relying on negative interactions should never be an intentional part of your training plans. If there aren't at least 10 'good boys!' for each 'Ah oh' – you need to re-evaluate your training strategies to make them more proactive. I am always dismayed when people tell me they have a 'disobedient' puppy. The dictionary defines disobedience as "a refusal to obey" which implies both a knowledge and considered rejection of what you want. Unless your dog has been performing a behaviour reliably for a long period of time – that is it has been obedient and then suddenly stops - it cannot really be 'disobedient'. In reality then all puppies – and in fact most dogs – are simply uneducated and uninformed as to the ins and outs of human protocols. So give your dog what he needs most - an education and say 'NO!' to intimidation.

