

## **Practice Makes Permanent**

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When it comes to dog training, whether it pertains to behavioral modification or improved performance, we all know practice makes perfect...or does it? Whether working to teach specific commands, tasks, or tricks, practice helps dogs' behavior improve--provided it is done correctly! Without knowledge of how and why it works, practice can actually serve to compound dog training and behavior problems.

The reasons for doing training in the first place influence an owner's application and practice over the long haul. Generally, people who are working with their dogs to get more of a desired behavior or response, rather than less of an inappropriate one, tend to practice consistently and positively. Practice creates many opportunities for success and encouragement. Using positive reinforcement, each step forward makes the next one more confident.

When owners work to reduce or eliminate problem behavior, they tend to taper off on training practice as soon as obvious symptoms of undesirable behaviors subside. During practice, their focus may be negative, singling out inappropriate behaviors and punishing, rather than teaching dogs new, positive outlets for their energy and redirected activities to replace undesirable ones.

Even when the focus is more encouraging, practice frequently ends too soon. As the pet owner's training involvement wanes, annoying dog behaviors typically resurface. Often inappropriate behavior stems from a simple source; the dog suffers from "unemployment"--a lack of positively directed activity where he can channel off available energy and earn positive reinforcement! During the time while the owner takes action works constructively with the dog problems may subside dramatically. Many owners mistakenly assume their dog has learned "right" from "wrong" and now understands which behaviors he should not repeat. Unfortunately, as owners reduce focused attention away from their temporarily compliant dogs, convinced the "training" is complete, many pet dogs revert to their old tried-and-true, negative-attention earning behaviors.

Commitment to practice with a dog's training may increase when the physiological and psychological reasons for it are understood. One reason for practicing an exercise many times is based on physiological learning theories. Each time we apply a technique, or our dog repeats a behavior, a small electrical charge is conducted through the brain in a pattern particular to that activity. Each time the behavior is repeated the same pathway is followed. In the same way a path to the beach or a trail through the woods becomes more defined the more it is used, so are the electrical pathways in the brain. The more times something is practiced, the easier it is for electrochemical processes in the brain to repeat the pattern. What this means is the dog's brain (and our brains too) will perform the cognitive or mental portion of the exercise being practiced more and more quickly, thus enabling the body to perform the physical part of the behavior more quickly and efficiently.

Another important psychological theory which explains the importance of practice is that of behavioral conditioning. Behavioral theorists support the notion that physical practice leads to more efficient performance. Starting slowly, repeating desired behavioral patterns many times so success is assured, is more effective than punishing for undesirable behaviors. Rewarding successful efforts with well-timed, appropriate, positive reinforcers such as touch, freedom, play, or occasionally food (though social positive reinforcers are my first choice) gives the dog reasons to want to repeat the pattern willingly. Once the dog learns "I do THIS to get THAT" (provided whatever "THAT" is appeals to the particular dog), willingness to cooperate is increased. As both owner and dog experience success during the early, very slow practice stage, skill, response time, and confidence increase. By gradually adding speed to the exercise or making it more complicated, while continuing to intermittently reward to hold the dogs attention and sense of expectation, performance is noticeably improved.

Stress, pressure, unfamiliar environments, and the presence of new people or dogs all can negatively affect performance. When performance of complex tasks has been simplified through repetitive practice, increased pressure situations are less likely to cause performance to decrease. In fact in many cases, the opposite is true; for some highly trained dogs, increased stress and excitement seems to fuel their cooperative fires. Energy generated by the unfamiliar situation is channeled into their performance of well-practiced tasks, to the pride of their handlers.

Of course there can be too much of a good thing; overworking a dog is counterproductive. Pushing too hard for too long will surface obstinacy and resentment, rather than compliance and cooperation. Dogs can be "burnt out" from overzealous training by an overly enthusiastic handler. But the more typical training practice problem, especially with family pets, is: not enough practice!

Knowing a dog well, paying careful attention during training practice, and watching for symptoms of boredom, disinterest or fatigue can help an owner know when it is time to quit. The time to end practice is while you are ahead, while your dog still feels attentive, eager, and focused. The owner who always stops training practice while the dog is feeling good can be certain to pick up on the same positive attitude the next time they start working. Always going from training to something really enjoyable, such as a walk or a meal, helps practice seem like an important link in a very desirable sequence. Seeing a light at the end of the tunnel helps everyone work harder and more enthusiastically to get through it.

A good rule of thumb for training practice is to spend no more minutes than the number of months old the puppy or dog is, up to about two years of age. This means a 6 month old puppy is good for about 6 minutes of concentration before it needs a break. Several (2 or 3) short practice sessions per day is much more effective than intermittent, grueling crash-course practice. On any given day a dog may be able to handle more or less practice, based on her mood and the difficulty of the exercise being practiced. Not adding additional steps to a sequence until previous ones are well established is important to building confidence.

Success and practice lead to immediate actions and responses, without doubt, hesitancy or obstinacy. With enough practice many behaviors become reflexive, bypassing conscious thought. At this point the quickness and efficiency of the dog's movements and responses take an exponential jump. This is a time when the dedicated owner is positively reinforced for being patient and practicing, and gets to enjoy the benefits of having a confident, willingly responsive dog!