

Time-out for misbehaviour

Dogs will only perform behaviours that they find rewarding to them, and this may be something as simple as us giving them eye contact, or telling them to be quiet when they are barking. Shouting at or scolding a dog for unwanted behaviours can therefore increase the likelihood of the behaviour happening again if dogs learn that the behaviour is a good way to get us to pay attention to them. Examples of attention, and therefore unintentional reward, may be shouting at a dog that is barking at us or telling a dog that is jumping up to “Get off” or pushing it away – we are looking at it, talking to it and touching it - all big responses! Therefore ignoring unwanted behaviour is usually sufficient.


However, if the dog has previously been rewarded by attention from us, they may initially try harder to get us to respond eg. barking or jumping more insistently. This all needs to be ignored!


Think how we behave as humans, we go to a coffee machine and have learned from past experience that if we insert our 50p the machine will dispense our coffee. What do we do, if having inserted our money, no coffee appears? Do we just give up and walk away? No! we are more likely to start frantically pressing the button or rocking the vending machine, ie. we will try harder to get the reward we were expecting – the same as our dog will!

There are, however, occasions when, despite our best efforts, we need to give a clearer signal to our dogs that their behaviour (such as barking or jumping on toddlers’ who cannot be expected to ignore the behaviour etc) is inappropriate and will have a consequence. As dogs are not only social, but pro-social ie they actively seek company and attention, then the removal of that attention can be very significant to them. This procedure will be familiar to those of you who are acquainted with “the naughty step” in terms of teaching children that their actions have a consequence.

As soon as your dog **starts** behaving in an inappropriate manner say, “timeout”, then take the dog to somewhere boring eg utility room or behind a baby gate etc (but not its bed area as this can result in problems with the dog settling at night) and leave it there for 30-90 seconds (but no longer than 3 minutes). Providing your dog is not barking, whining or scratching at the door let it out after that time and continue as normal. If it is barking etc, wait until there is silence and then open the door. Repeat this **as soon** as the behaviour starts, each time saying “timeout”. Your dog will learn the association between the word “timeout” and the resulting **lack of attention and exclusion** thus giving it the option in the future to correct its own behaviour when you say the word, or...be excluded. Providing you are consistent it will, in time, alter the behaviour, as the dog becomes aware of the consequence of his actions.

Be aware!

 Some dogs, having learned the association between the word “timeout” and the resulting exclusion, will attempt to avoid being taken hold of, in which case it is important that you do not reward escape behaviour with a game of chase. If the dog does run away from you in a “ha, you’ve got to catch me first” manner, turn immediately away from the dog and ensure that every member of the family walks out of the room, closing the door behind them so that the dog is still excluded. Having said “timeout,” do not talk to or even look at the dog until after it has been allowed access to you again.

 For adult dogs, use of a trailing line will prevent the ‘escape your hand’ scenario and ensure that you are able to take your dog to the ‘timeout’ area safely and successfully.