

YES ENVIRONMENT

by George K. Hobson

The normal reaction for an adult human when confronted by a child doing something undesirable is to say, "No!" This is most often done with a rising tone and a clearly emotional inflection, which sometimes even results in stopping the activity. In changing canine behavior, from the canine's point of view, there are several things wrong with this "no" action: the rising tone; the emotional inflection associated with the rising tone; that it may stop the behavior only for that action at that moment; and if repeated it may train unwanted behaviors. Too often, using no becomes a no environment for everything, resulting in a confused or anxious dog that offers either aggression, or very submissive acts such as urination.

There is an alternative to the use of no, an alternative that involves creating a whole environment around the concept of yes. To accomplish this humans need to accept that everything the dog does that is undesirable from our view is because of human constraints: it is not wrong from the dog's perspective. By taking a dog's every action, and using that opportunity to teach it a positive command we can gain control over many of the dog's natural inclinations. In some cases the action may be desirable, and by simply giving it a name (overlying a command) during the activity we can create a named action, and have it become one that is done under command and control. In the case of undesirable actions we need to look for another action that can be used to subsequently stop or control the activity. e.g. The dog is in a chair. Instead of telling it no, use the opportunity to teach it a command to get all four feet on the floor. Now we have a way to get the dog off of anything, and to train it to stay that way.

The broad issue may be seen as the stopping or changing of unwanted activities. This should not be confused with stopping a behavior when the real goal should be to control the activity of the behavior, or its outcome. If we accept the reality that dogs are going to do dog things, we can also understand that it is the owner's responsibility to train to prevent undesired actions - not to punish after the fact.

Dogs like to carry things in their mouths. If the dog has a shoe it's because the owner didn't keep track of the dog and the shoe. The behavior is carrying, and the activity is the shoe: in the yes environment the dog is encouraged to bring the shoe to its owner and rewarded for doing so. Then all shoes are unlikely to be taken and destroyed in secret. Do this for everything that the dog has in its mouth, and as the dog's leader, the owner can develop a dog that sees the owner's approval as better than possessing the object. Discrimination in what is not to be picked up is the second and later taught part of the solution. So call this what you wish, but to be successful the word no must disappear. In its place must come the concept of the yes environment: an environment of learning and trust.

One of the most common acts that destroy a dog's trust is the handler calling the dog and failing to reward the dog upon its arrival. The field dog that won't load, so the owner recalls it and roughly shoves it into the travel box. Or the pet owner that chases down the wandering dog while calling it by name. As much as the dog experiencing a negative action upon its return, the use of the dog's name in conjunction with the action also destroys the desire to obey. Since either correction or reward must occur within one-and-one-half seconds of the specific action to be most effective, and in my judgment not more than three seconds, it is improbable that any correction administered will be associated with other than the owner's proximity to the dog after that time frame. The training point here is to think ahead of the dog, and recognize the developing circumstances that may present a problem in obedience or activity. The thinking owner will either prevent the situation from developing or take measures to allow a proper, controlled training situation to occur that gives the dog a success instead of a failure. It may be nothing more than getting the distance to the dog reduced so that when the incident does occur that factor is excluded in gaining the opportunity to tell the dog yes -- you did that correctly. Particularly in early training situations, "correctly" means not having done something. You may want your dog to alert to strange noise but not bark. If your timing is correct and you notice the dog alerting and reward the alert before the bark, you will then be correct in next discouraging the bark.

Earlier this year I was standing outside the conference room of a large building after attending a meeting, which had lasted several hours. One of my chow hound Brittany's had accompanied me, had been released to take a stretch break, and had begun exploring the hallways. After a few minutes I noticed he had returned to me with a large, blue object in his mouth: it was a block of dog food containing warfarin poison, which is a standard means of rodent control with wide spread use. Instead of eating the block of dog food Nick had brought it back to me. With a racing heart and shaking hands I rewarded him for doing so. My truck made one of its fastest trips ever enroute to the emergency veterinarian, and several hundred dollars later Nick was pronounced out of danger. Did Nick bring me the block of food instead of eating it because he had always been rewarded for bringing me everything he picked up? I believe the yes environment saved his life ... Can there be another explanation?