

Why Your Puppy Stops Listening

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Many owners become frustrated when their puppy struggles to listen, despite having been to puppy classes and done all the training at home! If your puppy knows how to sit, why won't they listen? Canine behaviour is influenced by factors beyond training. Behaviour is influenced by understanding, motivation and capacity (see schematic).

Understanding is often overlooked. Dog's are very contextual learners. Behaviours learned in one environment do not automatically generalise to others. You have to keep training the same behaviour in new environments until the learning sticks. Puppies also need clear communication and a gradual training progression to fully understand what is being asked of them.

Motivation can be lost if the positive reinforcement (treats, toys and praise) is dropped too quickly. You need regular positive reinforcement to keep up puppy's motivation when learning new skills. A puppy is also less likely to respond reliably if the environment is more rewarding than the reinforcement being offered. If the environment is very distracting you need to increase the value of the reward (food or games) on offer.

Capacity includes both the dog's emotional state and physiological readiness to learn. Puppies are often too tired, overstimulated or frustrated to learn properly. A tired, overstimulated, anxious, or frustrated puppy will naturally find it more difficult to focus, regulate emotions, and respond to cues.

To increase your dog's capacity to learn, you can focus on meeting the dog's physical and emotional needs before doing any more training. Meeting behavioural needs can improve emotional regulation and learning capacity. Meeting a dog's needs involves providing appropriate and structured outlets for species- and breed-typical behaviour. These needs will vary depending on the individual dog, their genetics, and their behavioural tendencies. For example, Spaniels often benefit from opportunities to hunt, search, and retrieve, while Labrador Retrievers may thrive with retrieving activities, impulse control exercises, and gundog-style training games. Dachshunds commonly enjoy scent-based activities and digging opportunities, whereas sighthounds typically benefit from safe opportunities to chase and sprint.

Building reliable behaviour, therefore, involves more than practising cues at home. Puppies benefit from adequate sleep, appropriate enrichment, breed-specific outlets, positive socialisation experiences, and training that is rewarding and achievable. By focusing on both emotional well-being and practical training skills, owners can help raise dogs that are not only well-behaved but also confident, resilient, and emotionally balanced.

Requirements for Canine Behaviour

UNDERSTANDING

Focusing on you
Eye contact
Training
Training in different environments

Arousal
Fear
Socialisation
Impulse Control
Breed-specific outlets
Age
Diet
Sleep

Marker word
Luring
Rewards
(food/toy/praise)
Cont. reinforcement
Intermit. reinforcement
Training with games

CAPACITY

MOTIVATION