

How dogs learn.

“ Dogs are similar to humans in some ways: they need companionship, as well as mental and physical stimulation in order to achieve their potential”. However a dog does not understand the abstract principles of right and wrong as we do so it is important to remember this so we do not credit them with having such powers, it will only lead to disappointment with your dog. Fogle, Dr. Bruce, Australian Dog Training, Dorking Kindersley, Australia, 2000. p11.

“ When training a dog the trainer must always keep in mind the limitations of the dogs mind – every dog is an individual. Adopt methods best suited to the dogs age and temperament”. (Van Kyrk, Matthew, Guide to training your own dog, T.F.H. Publications, U.S.A. 1995. P2).

All dogs learn about life in the same simple way; through trial and error and associations. 1. “They respond to rewards and develop bad habits when they are bored. They are always learning whether they are being “schooled” or not.” (Fogle, Dr. Bruce, Australian Dog Training, Dorking Kindersley, Australia, 2000. P11).

Certain factors motivate dogs to learn. One of these is natural curiosity. As dogs are gregarious and curious they will investigate and learn through these experiences. Another is through taste and smell. The most important factor to consider in the learning process of dogs is to understand that like their wolf ancestors they are pack animals and will respond to their pack leader. For training purposes it is important to build a positive relationship with your dog through leadership and friendship. The dog must understand through your actions and deeds that you are superior, you are the boss, and you are the pack leader. It is through all these factors that the dog learns to make associations with what it learns through the experiences it has through trial and error. It may make good associations or bad associations, anything that brought a positive response or outcome it will continue to do anything that had a negative outcome it will quickly diminish and avoid.

This is the basis of which training programs are based. Any behaviour that is wanted from the dog is rewarded (positive reinforcement); this creates a good

association with that behaviour, encouraging the dog to continue it. Any behaviour that is unwanted from the dog is punished or ignored (negative reinforcement), creating a bad association in the dogs mind and encouraging them to diminish that behaviour.

It is also important to be aware of the third type of association, being area association. Area association occurs if a dog is only trained in one particular spot ie. at home. It may then associate its good behaviour to only be required at home. Therefore it is important to train our dogs in a variety of locations to avoid the area association in our dogs mind.

Credit for portions of this document to Tan Teck Woon of A Good Dog Training School – Affiliate member of AAPDT. Parts of this document have been excerpted from his essay Training Methods & Maxims as part of his Dog Training Instructor Course with Dog Obedience Guidance Systems of Australia (DOGS).

NB: Please note whilst we have done all possible to ensure the information in this article is current, the AAPDT does not accept any liability for this information.