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Your Smart Dog

The Top Three Things NOT to Say to Your Dog

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It was a beautiful weekend and I spent a lot of time outdoors with my dogs. There were other dogs and their humans out, as well, and I noticed a common theme among almost every encounter. All of the people were saying virtually the same things to their dogs, no matter what problem they were encountering. The most noticeable characteristic of each of my observations was that these words and phrases didn't seem to change the behavior of the dogs one bit. Let's take a look at these three words or phrases and try to understand why these are the top three things NOT to say to your dog.

No!

Arguably, the most overused and invaluable word in our communication with our dog is the word "No." I hear from many clients "I tell him 'No' all the time, but he just doesn't listen." Some chalk it up to a stubborn dog, while others think their dog just doesn't want to listen. While it frustrates us that our dogs "just don't get it," it helps to look at this

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situation from the point of view of the dog. When we yell at Fido for getting in the trash, WE know that we want him to get out of the trash. Logically (to us), we yell out "Fido, NO!" and believe that he should

figure out that we want him out of the trash. Stop for a moment, though, and think about what information this conveys to the dog to help him (1) stop the behavior that you don't like and (2) engage in the behavior that you DO like. Does "No!" actually tell him what you want him TO DO? Of course not. The dog isn't getting all the information he needs in order to

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comply with your request. To us, it's obvious – get out of the trash and come over here and lie down and be a good dog. To the dog, he's not getting any helpful information at all.

You need to stop focusing on what you don't want the dog to do and start thinking about what exactly you want your dog to do. Yelling "No!" when your dog jumps isn't nearly as helpful as telling him to "Sit." Sitting is what you want your dog TO DO when you come home or have guests over. By giving the dog only half of the information, you're making it hard for the dog to figure out the correct behavior. Tell him what you want him TO DO. After all, he cannot sit and jump at the same time.

Yelling Dog's Name

Almost as common as "No!" yelling your dog's name to get him to stop doing something just doesn't make sense to the dog. It's actually providing *less information* to the dog than "No!" All you're doing is yelling his name – not telling



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him what TO DO, not telling him what to stop doing, just yelling his name. Most often this is done in an ugly and punitive tone of voice. Again, no good information is being conveyed to the dog. And worse, now he's associating his name with something unpleasant because usually after he hears his name, something less than desirable happens (he gets yelled at, gets dragged away from the trash bin, gets shoved down for jumping, etc.). Just like "No!" yelling at your dog to stop isn't a good option because it doesn't provide the dog the information he needs to comply with your requests.

Teaching your dog to behave is a relatively simple task, *when you know what it is you want your dog **TO DO**.*

Just like the "No!" scenario, you need to start focusing on what you want your dog TO DO. Practice saying your dog's name in a happy and welcoming voice. Even if he's in the trash! Much more helpful to the dog is a phrase like this: "Fido? Come here boy, out of the trash." When Fido does come to you, praise him! Tell him what a good boy he is! He'll come to you more quickly the next time (and consequently get less out of the trash!). Better yet, he's learning that when you call his name, good things happen, and he's also learning that coming to you is much more fun and rewarding than getting in the trash.

Stop!

A variation on the previous two, "Stop!" is another common directive that folks give their dogs. Just like the other two, "Stop!" doesn't provide your dog with helpful information on what you'd like him TO DO. This directive is usually given when you're angry, frustrated, or tired, and signals to the dog your unhappiness with whatever behavior he's engaged in at the

time. While he may understand that you're frustrated, he won't really know why or what behavior he's engaged in that elicits the "Stop!" Dogs are relatively simple – they aren't capable of reading between the lines. Make it very clear what you want, and the reward your dog generously when he gets it right.

Conclusion

You need to stop focusing on what you don't want the dog to do and start thinking about what exactly you want your dog to do. Teaching your dog to behave is a relatively simple task, *when you know what it is you want your dog TO DO*. Remember, it's always easier to teach your dog what you want him to do, rather than making him guess the "right" answer. For example, if you don't want your dog to jump on you when you come home, instead of yelling at him for jumping, tell him what you want him TO DO – sit. It's very clear (if he already knows "sit,") what he needs to do to earn a reward. Otherwise, if you just tell your dog "No!" he's left to try to figure out what it is you really want. Make it easy on yourself – and your dog – and eliminate those three phrases from your vocabulary. Instead, tell your dog what will earn the reward and then deliver on your promise when he gets it right!

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Helping good dogs become great dogs.

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