

Dog Training & Behaviour

PROBLEM SOLVING - STEP BY STEP

First Aid

Humans being what they are, they usually put up with things being bad for a long time.

They try to ignore them, try to pretend the situation doesn't exist, and can find a hundred and one reasons and excuses for why it's happening.

In order for someone to really admit to themselves and others that they, indeed, have a problem, the problem has to have quite a bit of impact on their lives.

As we've said before, with dog problems especially, there's a lot of pressure from other people too which hardly ever helps and often compounds the situation - whether it's the mother-in-law tutting, friends refusing to visit, husbands or wives threatening to have the dog put down if the situation doesn't improve, neighbours complaining - it all adds up to extra stress, extra worry.

Unfortunately, the more stressed the owner is, the more likely it is that the dog will manifest even more problems, as dogs very much mirror their owners in many ways. So, the situation can quickly deteriorate to the point where the owner just cannot cope anymore and may consider re-homing the dog.

Contrary to popular opinion, this dynamic is the main reason for dogs being taken to the RSPCA - and not, as some will have you believe, that there are all these hateful people out there who have no morals, no character and no feelings.

I cannot know what caused you to get hold of this book, but if you have a problem like that, please do take heart. Everyone experiences low spots in any relationship as we go through life. I can't promise that in your particular case everything will be resolved quickly and easily, but even if it cannot, we can work through this thing firmly, and calmly, and there's never any need for hysterics of any kind.

The first thing in any problem situation is what I call First Aid - not a quick fix, or a miracle cure, but just some action to stop things from getting worse, to stabilise the situation, and to create a breathing space in which the problem can be looked at rationally, with a clear mind.

First Aid Routines

Some First Aid routines can include -

- Stopping for a while whatever causes the major conflict. With an aggressive dog, for example, this might mean stopping all walks just for a week; if there's training problems, taking a holiday from that for a while,. Do remember this has nothing to do with giving up or giving in - all it is designed to do is create a breather while we consider our options.
- Removing the dog - I have sometimes advised putting the dog into kennels for a week, or to have it move in with someone else if this is practical. This is a useful option if the owner is not decided whether they want to keep the dog - sometimes people find out that way how much they love the dog and how much they would miss him if he was gone, which in turn gives them renewed incentive to work at the problem. At other times, the relief of not having to cope with a problem is so enormous that they can make a clear and level headed decision that the dog would probably be better off somewhere else.
- Finding Short Term Fixes - such as hiring a baby sitter for a week if the dog freaks out when left; finding a dog walker; finding a dog day care place; telling all visitors and friends that you've left the country for a week; if it's house training, keep the dog on an easy clean surface; taking some time off work or whatever it takes to get a holiday from the problem just for a while.

Especially if the problem is severe, the first thing you'll do is to take a deep, deep breath - Phew. Make a cup of coffee, relax and now let's look at how to proceed from here.

A Matter Of Time

In all problems that humans manage to create for themselves, there's a key factor that's often overlooked or forgotten, especially when there's a lot of stress and unhappiness about - TIME.

Statements such as “The dog is disobedient” or “The dog is aggressive” do not allow for the passing of time. They’re a kind of label stuck onto the unfortunate creature - the dog is always disobedient and will be disobedient forever.

By simply adding a word or two that qualifies the statement with a view to the inexorable passing of time, it doesn’t sound quite so terrifying anymore: “The dog is still disobedient” and “The dog hasn’t stopped being aggressive yet”, for example.

Just by changing a statement such as “I can’t control my dog in the presence of visitors” into “I can’t control my dog in the presence of visitors YET”, puts the problem into temporal perspective and shows the way out - namely to go towards a time and a place, when the owner can control the dog in the presence of visitors.

You see, I’ve worked in depth with all kinds of rescued or problem dogs in my practise and - much more revealingly - in my home. In the end what mattered was not what the dog was like now, but what he or she would become, given a reasonable investment of love, thought, and effort.

Any kind of dog problem needs this temporal view because without it, you’re stuck in one place. By looking at it over time, you can not only create a light at the end of the tunnel where there was none before, but also allow you to see if the problem’s getting worse, or better. I always say that if there is even the slightest improvement, you’re on the right track and all you have to do is hang on in there and it will be alright eventually.

The second aspect of taking the passing of time into account is that there isn’t a dog on god’s green earth that is ALWAYS, CONTINUOUSLY aggressive, disobedient, uncontrollable etc.

Not only does labelling any dog in this way take away any chance of future improvement, it doesn’t take into consideration that the incidents of aggressive, disobedient, uncontrollable behaviours are limited and only occur some of the time.

Even dogs with the worst type of problems get some things right some of the time, and it these times that should be focussed on clearly and extended so there will be more and more of the desirable behaviour. In the Step-by-Step guide we’re going to look at how to really put the incidents of problem behaviour into perspective, so that they can be worked upon and changed.

You might like to look at your own dog's problems now and perhaps say out loud a new statement, such as: "My dog does sometimes, and I haven't learned to teach him how to YET" and note how much more productive thinking of it like that is as opposed to the "My dog IS ... and I can't ..." approach.

Now that we've sorted out that there is hope, that there's things you can do and things both you and your dog can learn to do differently; and that there will be a time when all your current problems will have become nothing more than memories, let's go on the practical steps of problem solving.

Problem Solving – Step By Step

The Dog Is Not His Problems

The very first step in sorting out dog problems is to separate the dog from the problems.

Pardon?

Yes. Fido is not the problem.

Fido is a dog, with four legs and a nose and a pair of bright eyes and a mind all of his own.

He does things. What he DOES is the problem.

He is not a bad dog, you see. Or a vicious dog, or a naughty dog, or a disobedient dog.

He is a dog who behaves sometimes in a manner that is not going down too well in the circumstances. That's all.

Now I do appreciate it's not so easy to keep loving someone if they're always annoying you, stressing you out, causing you a lot of expense, headache and heartache.

But if you can keep it clear in your mind that you still love the dog himself, it's just what he sometimes does that's a problem, you will find that you can stay much more positive throughout the whole treatment/training process.

See, it's like this. When a child has done something bad, and the people around it then go on and call it "A BAD CHILD", it's easy to set up a self fulfilling prophecy, or a vicious circle, if you prefer.

A "bad dog", similarly, doesn't get cuddled so much anymore, doesn't get loved as much, doesn't get played with as much, doesn't feel wanted or loved any more. And that usually leads to more bad behaviour in the long run.

In order to make this clear for you and your dog, please take the time now and make a list of all your dog's good points. Is your dog loving? good sometimes? friendly with some dogs or people? Does your dog love you? Are there times when you have fun together, or feel you're really close? That is the central point of your relationship. If you have such safe places to fall back upon when things go wrong, you will always find the patience to go on, to do more to help the dog learn to behave better.

Towards A Solution - Complaints to Facts

When I ask people what the problem is, I usually get a long list of complaints about the dog's behaviour. So, rather than complaints, what we need to do next is to state clearly when what occurs that causes the problems.

Instead of - he's uncontrollable and he never does what I tell him to do and he destroys the carpet in the kitchen and he pulls on the lead and he doesn't listen when I shout at him ...

Stop, think about it for a moment and make a list of clearly stating when which problem occurs in your lives together, such as:

- a. I can't control him when visitors arrives YET, he jumps at them and barks.
- b. He pulls on the lead when we're walking towards the park.
- c. Sometimes he won't come back from the garden when I call him.
- d. Two out of five times, he won't come back in the park when I call him.

e. He has chewed the carpet in the kitchen on five separate occasions when I was out for longer than 4 hours.

f. He runs around the house once or twice a day for about 10 minutes and when I scream at him he just runs harder.

I hope you can already feel that this has become more logical, less depressing, less hopeless, and not so overwhelming when listed like that.

Now would be a good time to list also what your dog does particularly well, or areas where he is no problem to you. With the dog above, the list might look something like this:

- a. He's very friendly with people and other dogs most of the time.
- b. He is very clever and learns some things quickly.
- c. He is good even on long journeys in the car.
- d. He sleeps through the night without any problems.
- f. He is a good guard dog - no-one can get in the house without him telling us about it!

Looking at the positive list, it becomes clear that the dog in questions is not irreparably brain damaged or “a dog from hell” as I've heard owners term their dogs on more than one occasion. In this list, there are the keys to what he can achieve, his very own seeds of greatness, if you pardon the expression!

If he can learn quickly, he can learn how to behave better quickly too - it's a question now of finding ways to teach him.

If he can sleep all night and feel relaxed, then he can also do that at other times - it's a question of “how”, and not a question of “if”.

Do take the time now to make a positive list for your own dog.

Take your time and make sure you're giving your dog all the credit he or she is due.

Setting Priorities

Going back to the detailed list of problematic behaviours, the next step is to sort out which of these behaviours/situations are the most urgent to deal with.

This depends entirely on your own feelings. When you make your own list, look at each one in turn, and the one that annoys you most goes to the top of your list.

This will become the first problem to work with.

In our example, the owner thought about it for a long time, and, seeing that the carpet in the kitchen was already beyond salvation, the pulling on the lead could be put up with, and the “not coming when called” could be worked around by not letting the dog off the lead for time being, chose the unacceptable behaviour with visitors as the main and first objective, closely followed by the unacceptable running about the house which caused much stress and unhappiness between owner and dog on a daily basis.

If you’ve ever tried writing a letter and cooking a meal at the same time, you might be aware that it’s pretty difficult not to end up with both a burned dinner and a very disjointed letter.

So, in this spirit, we will only deal with one problem at a time. The most pressing problem removed, and the camel’s back will not have broken, in spite of carrying an otherwise hefty load of straw!

Towards, and not Away From

It is much, much easier to tell someone what to do, then to try and tell them what not to do.

To illustrate this principle, let me tell you about something I observed at a local supermarket not so long ago:

There’s this hassled looking lady pushing a heavily laden trolley with a two year old in the child seat. The little boy is banging two cans together. “Stop that immediately!” she screams at him. After shouting, threatening and finally wrestling the cans from him (which resulted in much wailing), that particular noise has now stopped. So now the little boy starts rocking backwards and forwards, banging his shoes into the trolley. “Oh for god’s sake stop that will

you or I'm going to ...” So he stops and reaches out and rakes a whole armfull of jam jars off the shelf. They crash and splatter on the floor ...

Whilst she's down there, trying to pick up the ones that weren't broken, nearly in tears, muttering to herself, I quietly step up to the trolley and pass the kid a colourful leaflet from a holder nearby. He takes it from me and immediately becomes absorbed in crumpling it up, straightening it, tearing a bit.

It is quiet. I walk away before the woman notices me.

You take away a behaviour, and then there's no behaviour. The creature in question will then need to do something - anything! - else. In the absence of guidance, this could be anything of a million possible behaviours with the chance of it doing something that's exactly what you want similarly a million to one against.

Worse still, most likely the dog or child will do the same or something similar as it was involved in before it was disrupted. Think about it. If I tell you to stop tapping your foot, how many other things could you think of to irritate me instead?

Therefore, it is of paramount importance in problem solving to turn around any statements of what you don't want your dog to do, and turn it into something that you want your dog to do instead.

So, in our example, “I don't want him to bark all the time and leap all over my visitors” becomes .. what?

Again, this is a perfectly personal choice.

The owner in our example thought about it for a while and then came up with the following:

- When visitors come, I want my dog to sit by my side and let them in when I open the door.
- I want my dog to stay close to me at all times, and lie down quietly in the same room with us.
- If they want to say hello to him, I want him to go up to them and sit in front of them, and to lie down again quietly if I tell him.

So now, look at your problem and decide what exactly you would like your dog to do instead.

Be as specific and as detailed as you can be - the more specific the behaviour required from your dog, the easier it will be to teach it.

How To ...?

Now we have a positive intention - an aim of how we want it to be. The next question to the owner is: Do you know how to achieve this?

This owner - as do most owners at this point - said, no, they did not. Stupid question! If I knew how to get my dog to do it, don't you think I would have done it by now?

Not necessarily. You see, the owner is comparing the way it was up to now - the starting point - with how it's supposed to be - the outcome - and the difference between the two is great, the owner could not imagine how to get from one to the other.

If you similarly feel that the outcome of your currently problem is way beyond your reach, take heart.

You see, a journey like that doesn't have to be done all in one strenuous and difficult trip.

You can take it in stages.

Here's another example for you:

A young lady I knew was deeply depressed. She was stuck on a caravan site, with three children under 5, on social security, and could see no way out of this horrendous situation. How she got there, and whether it was her fault or not, is, incidentally, quite beside the point.

Now, there she was, and it was raining, too, just to make matters worse, and she was near suicidal. When asked what she wanted, she said she would love a house of her own with a garden, a job to provide decent things, and a decent school for her children. But from where she was she could see no way on Earth to achieve this.

Now, three years later, she has all the things she wanted. How did she do it?

A step at a time.

She joined a single parent group and got advice on housing and benefits. There, she found another lady who also had a child. Together, they could rent a reasonable house in a reasonable area. Both found part time jobs and babysat for each other. It wasn't really that difficult at all in hindsight. All it needed was to know what was wanted in the first place, a bit of encouragement and her getting up and actively searching for ways to get towards what she wanted.

And here's a doggy example as well:

Peter, a terrier cross, chased cats. He really, really hated cats. He would literally froth at the mouth and although he wasn't that big, had pulled his owner physically along a gravel path, face down, for about 10 yards once. He had snapped strong leather leads and two collars on other occasions. The owner could not even begin to imagine what he would want Peter to do instead, it seemed so impossible - so I asked him to imagine some Fairy waving a magic wand. Eventually, he decided to ask for Peter looking at the cat but not responding beyond that - but he shook his head even as he said it - surely this was pure fantasy.

As it so happened, Peter had had no obedience training at all and really didn't listen to his owner at all, even when there were no cats. So step by step, his owner learned how to communicate with his dog, first indoors, then in the garden, and over a period of a year at dog training classes and with much practise, they are now at a point where Peter still hates cats, but will Sit when told to do so, and even turn around on the lead and walk the other way when his owner tells him.

The longest journey begins with the first step. So, going back to our original example, how could a dog be encouraged to sit by the side of the owner when they open the door to visitors?

That is such a specific question, it becomes easy to answer. A number of possible answers are provided in this book. Dog trainers would certainly know, and even non dog owners might have an idea or two on the subject.

These are the ideas the owner came up with:

- I could practise getting the dog to sit with me at times when there are no visitors so it's not so hard for the dog to keep calm.
- I could teach the dog to stay and ring the doorbell myself!
- I could keep the dog on the lead. I could take the dog outside on the lead to greet people because he's not so excited when it's not in the passage way.
- I have a good friend who could come in and out many times and help me practise. I could get people to get the dog to sit for a treat.
- I could join a dog training club and learn more about how to get a dog to obey even when he's very excited.

From depression and helplessness to possibility. This owner was not very knowledgeable, in fact it was their first dog. They just used their own common sense and problem solving skills with very little help from me as to the specifics.

What made it possible was to look at what specifically the dog needed to learn in order to replace an unacceptable behaviour with an acceptable one.

Once you know what you want, you might find that you already have enough knowledge and skills to achieve it. If you do not have the skills or the knowledge, it is up to you to acquire them by learning more about dog training and behaviour both theoretically and practically.

You will find in the following chapter a lot of practical information on how to overcome the most common problems; and you might also like to consider having a look at general dog training to help you increase your control over your dog, whatever the situation.

There are quite a number of books and videos on the market; I would recommend "Dynamic Dog Training" if you need some practical advice on how to teach a dog just about anything; it is especially designed to take the needs of first time owners into consideration, and is suitable for any breed, and any age of dog.

For details see "Further Information" at the back of this book.

Time To Act

Now that we have an outcome, and some idea on how to achieve this, it is time to test the theory in practise and do the things we've decided to do.

In our ongoing example, now it's time for the owner to practise getting the dog to sit quietly by their side on the lead in many different places and under many different circumstances.

And this is what happened:

At first, the dog would only sit for a very short time before getting up again, but after a day or two, the dog began to learn and would sit right away when asked, and stayed quite nicely as long as there wasn't something major going on (such as the door bell ringing). But even there, with some perseverance, the dog could now sit for a short time, but had to be told over and over to sit, and had to be restrained on the lead numerous times throughout the visitor being present.

This went on for a week, and the owner said that it was often exasperating, always hard work, and quite an effort. So, the most important question at this point was:

Is it working?

Is it working? does NOT mean: Are we there now?

It means: Is there any progress at all towards the outcome?

In the example, the dog had definitely improved. He was sitting quicker, calming down faster, had to be told to sit still less and less often as the week progressed. He still had his moments, but there were also times when he was really behaving quite well, considering for how long he had been behaving "badly" before the treatment started.

Taking stock after a time is very important. Even if there's only the slightest improvement, that must mean we'll eventually get there. It means that whatever you're doing is basically right. Of course, there could be other methods which could speed up the process, but generally, when you have some improvement,

you can relax in the knowledge that you are really on your way to overcoming the problem in time.

What if there had been no improvement at all?

Would that mean that the dog was incorrigible?

Not at all. It just meant that the particular treatment didn't work in this particular case. Every dog's an individual, and there are many, many different ways to skin a cat. It means you need to find a different approach, an approach that will work for you and your dog in your particular situation, an approach that will show some improvement in the problem after a couple of days of effort or a week at the latest.

Once this approach has been found, it's time for the last stage in the treatment, and I've called it ...

The Long Walk Home

A strange name? Well, if you've ever known anyone who "tried" to diet or "tried" to get fit, you might be familiar with the enthusiasm and dedication of the idea, the effort at the beginning, and then, as the enthusiasm slowly fades as the days go by, all the gains that had been made in the beginning slide away until the person is as fat or unfit as before.

The same thing happens with dog problems. That's why I called the last stage The Long Walk Home. You need to resolve not only to see things through to their completion, but also to remember to keep some of the changes you have made to your life style.

In our example, after a while the dog will be more responsive. If at this point the owner turned their attention to something else, the dog would soon start to need to be told to sit three times again instead of the once, and might slide right back to the owner having to shout and scream and threaten.

A change in the dog's behaviour needs some maintenance and some vigilance. Our owner needs to remember to practise once in a while, and they need to remember to keep an eye on the state of the dog's behaviour, so if this begins to slide back, they take remedial action right away and before things become troublesome once more. Prevention is better than cure: it is much easier to maintain a healthy body weight than to have to loose 20 pounds.

So, just to back up on what we've said, here are the seven steps to overcoming dog problems once more in brief.

The Seven Steps To Overcoming Dog Problems

Firstly, before you do anything, be clear in your mind if it is really a training or behaviour problem, or if you need to seek health or dietary advice first. If you are happy that it really is only a training or behaviour problem, you can proceed.

Secondly, take a holiday from your worst problems by applying First Aid routines to give you time and space to begin approaching the problem rationally and from a calm and resourceful state of mind.

Step 1 – Be Specific

State clearly and precisely when and how the problems occur. The more detailed you are, the easier it is to find solutions.

Step 2 - Identify the most pressing problem.

Step 3 – Decide On Your Aim

Take this problem, to turn it around and to decide what you would like the dog to do instead, thereby creating a target, aim or outcome for you and your dog to achieve.

Step 4 – Your Treatment Plan

Find ways and means to achieve what you want by planning the intermediary steps towards the end result; to create your own treatment plan. This might mean that you have to acquire extra skills, knowledge or other means until you were confident in the plan and that you not only feel you can carry it out, but that all the methods make sense and feel good to you personally.

Step 5 - Put theory into practise, start doing what you had planned to do.

Step 6 – Your Results?

Look back on what happened in order to check that the plan is working. If it is (and remember any improvement, no matter how small, is an indication that you are going in the right direction), then you can go on to Step 7: if there is no measurable improvement at all, you go back to the drawing board and find alternative ideas or methods and try these instead until you find something that works for you and your dog.

Step 7 – Long Term Resolution

Keep working through the problem until it has been completely resolved, and keep an eye out for any times when it might like to creep back in again.

7 Steps To Solving Dog Behaviour Problems

is an Excerpt From Overcoming Dog Behaviour Problems.

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