

Why Dogs "Ignore" Commands

Speaker Key

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Transcript

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Imagine living with somebody who commanded of you all day long. "Get in," "get off," "get over," "get on," "don't touch," in a very stern, militant voice. Wouldn't you want to pack your bags and leave?

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Hi, I am Susan Garrett and this is Shaped by Dog, where dog training makes sense at both ends of the leash. And I'm going to start with a question today. The question is, when you ask your dog to do something, sit, down, come, roll over, get in a bed, what do you believe you are doing?

Do you believe you're giving a command? Do you believe you're cueing a behavior? Do you believe you are making a request or maybe depending on your dog, it might be a suggestion? Because what you think you are doing has an unbelievable impact on how you will do it.

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And I hope this gives you reason to think. Think about the way you talk to your dog today and maybe about any words you've ever spoken to your dog in the past. When we talk about giving a dog a command, it's something very militant. It's very stern and it's absolutely non-negotiable.

It's a command. 'I am the master.' There's just so many powerful words that the command is demanding. Now, a cue, a more scientific word, cues a behavior. I truly believe I'm cueing my dog, but I'm making request. In my brain I'm making a request.

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And I'm going to preface this by saying, when I make a request of my dog, my expectation is that they will respond to that request with joy, with drive, with expediency, with urgency.

And if my dog for some reason chose not to do what I'd asked, I don't take that as a sign of disobedience. I don't take that as anything other than a reflection on the education that I've given that dog.

"What is missing?" "What is incomplete?" I think if the world considered dog's behavior from that point of view, they would not only have more patience for the dogs in their life, they would have more patience for the people in their life because I believe dogs are a vector to help us all to become the kind of people we're meant to be.

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Now, if you consider that all of the things that we train a dog to do using operant conditioning, which most of the things we train a dog to do, we use operant conditioning, all of them follow a model that I have spoken about here on Shaped by Dog in the past, [Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence](#).

So, if you think in terms of a cue, the cue would be the antecedent that prompts the dog to do a behavior. Let's say I say "sit." That's the antecedent that the dog says, "I know what that means," and they will put their butt on the ground.

And the consequence is probably something pleasant, something that reinforces the dog, even if it's just a pat or a smile or a "good dog." Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence.



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But here's where it gets super sticky. When we are asking the dog to do something, cueing a response, we are thinking in a singular form. We're thinking we have a word, or it might be a signal to get a dog to do something, but the dog is thinking in pictures. They're thinking about all of the things that go into the request that we just made.

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And you're going to say all of the things, "Put your butt on the ground," but oh nay nay, it's not that simple. And it's super important that all dog owners consider this. Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence. It's one behavior, in this case, a sit, but it's many antecedents, which is why it's referred to as an antecedent arrangement.

Because what a dog is thinking of the pictures when we ask for something, they're thinking of everything that they had to learn or unlearn in the process of what a sit is. So, for many people, they start teaching the dog a sit by putting a cookie over their nose, putting it over their head until the puppy or the dog loses their balance and puts their back end on the ground.

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So, as they're doing that, they're saying "sit" to the dog. So, sit initially means follow reinforcement, and when you follow it far enough you get a cookie. That's the picture that the dog initially learns. Some dogs learn sit unfortunately by somebody pulling up on the collar and pushing down on the back end.

So, they learn that this is the action that means "sit" when my hands come towards you. It has some powerful meaning. So, the dog has to learn and unlearn what "sit" means many, many times over because maybe you will lose the lure of the cookie in your hand, and you might just use your hand when the hand comes up like this it means sit, but that means if I can't see your hands, I don't have to sit.

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There's so many things that the dog has to process what they're learning, what the antecedent arrangements really mean. It's what you hear. It's what you see. It's what you smell. It's what you feel. It's the sound of the cue, "sit," "sit," "sit." It's the emotion behind the sound of the cue. There are so many things that go into this picture, which is why some dogs won't sit when you say "sit," but they might sit when you say "sit!"

It doesn't mean that your dog needs a command. It just means how you train the behavior didn't build in the urgency you wanted by using a simple quiet cue "sit." So also evolved in the "sit" is what the dog is experiencing. What other distractions are in the environment? Where is the dog? Does "sit" mean "run in front of you and sit right in front of you?" Does "sit" mean sit in the kitchen only, but it doesn't mean sit at the front door when our company is coming through that door?

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So, your dog's education on all these cues that you believe you've taught them is mostly incomplete until you've helped them generalize and weed out the pictures that are really not that important. And how do you do that? Well, you've got to consider the antecedent arrangements in your training. That's a big part of what helps a dog to learn or delays the learning for that dog.

But also, there's the human mechanics. How well did you arrange the environment for that dog's learning? The human mechanics and the antecedent arrangements, is what brings clarity for the dog in those pictures.



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But then there's what reinforces the behavior. Where is the value of the reinforcement? If the value is 'chase the food,' eventually I'm going to repeat this so many times that you're going to understand what I mean and I'm going to fade the food, the value still stays with the food because "sit" meant "find the food."

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"Okay, now I just have to wait to find the food." The dog is focused entirely on the food. It may never happen that the [food value transfers](#) into the act of doing a sit with you. And if it does happen, it will very likely be an unusually slow process and you might lose some of the joy and the expediency along the way.

Take for example Kim who works here. She has a Terrier Mix, Belief. Now, I asked her if I could take Belief out for a walk with one of my other dogs. But before I went, I said, "Kim, can you get Belief to sit in the kitchen?" Now, it was dinner time for Belief when I asked her to do this, and so she called her in and Belief was very excited because it was dinner time.

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She asked her to sit, and if you're watching this on YouTube, you can see Belief came in like a flash and sat very quickly, very excitedly, very expectantly. And then when Kim took the bowl of food and put it in front of her, she still sat there and stared at it.

She didn't leave to try and eat the food because she understands ['sit' means hold position](#) until I give you a release word.

Now does that mean when I took Belief for a walk a little later in the afternoon, that when I put her winter coat on and I took her out in the cold and me, who isn't her owner asked her to sit, that she would sit. Well, if the cue "sit" is trained properly, then yeah, I would get that sit.

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Okay, but what if she's running away from me? Would I still get the "sit?" Absolutely, I get the sit with the same enthusiasm, the same joy, the same drive because of the way the 'sit' was taught. But what if that dog was like a hundred meters away from me in the winter coat, in the cold on the way back to the house?

Absolutely, I'd get that same sit. But then people will say, "Oh, but if we're going to train this way, when can I get rid of giving the dog a reinforcement?" The way we train, we don't eliminate reinforcement. We [evolve what's reinforcing](#). I'm going to say that one more time. When you train this way, you don't think in terms of eliminating reinforcement, you think of evolving what is reinforcing.

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So maybe Belief gets the reinforcement of getting to chase my dogs because she sat when I asked her to not chase the dog. Maybe she gets the reinforcement of getting to run in the field. Maybe she gets the reinforcement of tugging on a toy. She might get a reinforcement of some food.

But when you train this way, the value gets transferred into the act of working with you or in this case, somebody that isn't even her owner.

And I purposely didn't take one of my Border Collies out to do this demonstration because I know the comment section would then be singing. "Oh, it's your Border Collie and Border Collies are brilliant."



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This isn't my dog. And she's a Terrier Mix. When we're training this way, we are creating partnerships. Think of commands. That's creating pressure.

Training doesn't have to be that way. And it all goes back to the way you consider the words you say to your dog and the way you interpret the dog's non-compliance with what you've said.

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When you stop thinking it's disobedience and you start considering, it's a reflection of what you've taught, the world of possibilities opens up for your dog to have joy at a thousand feet regardless who's asking them to do the behavior. Reinforcement used correctly [is never bribery, it's communication](#).

When a behavior is taught cleanly, generalized well, includes the element of the dog's joy for working in the criteria of what success looks like, it becomes automatic for the dog. They don't have to consider, "Should I comply or not?" It becomes automatic.

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A well taught cue doesn't require compliance because it creates confidence as it's creating teamwork between the dog and the human. Well taught cues hold up under distraction. Well taught cues, they travel anywhere. Well taught cues don't create hesitation in the dog because they have confidence.

They know how to respond with joy. Don't believe people that say the dog needs to know what might happen if they don't listen. It's the trainer that needs to know what should happen if the dog doesn't listen.

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Turn the magnifying glass on you and you will be a better person for it. Thank you for joining me today. And remember, stay curious, stay humble, and continue to make life better at both ends of the leash. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 245: Make Dog Training Easy! Quick Guide To Antecedent Arrangements](#)

[Podcast Episode 177: Dog Training Outside The Box: Transfer Of Value Case Study](#)

[Podcast Episode 135: Test Your Dog's Sit Stay Training](#)

[Podcast Episode 205: The Hidden World Of Reinforcement For Dogs And Why You Need To Know](#)

[Podcast Episode 144: Teach Your Dog To Listen No Matter What... Even If You Think They Are Stubborn](#)



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About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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