

Attention-Seeking Behaviors

Dogs are great at learning how to get our attention. They bark at us, scratch at the door, whine, nudge us with their noses, paw at our hands - anything to get us to pay attention to them. The reason these annoying behaviors never seem to go away no matter what we do is because we are often inadvertently reinforcing the behavior with our attempts to stop them. Essentially, we give the dog the attention he is seeking when we yell at him or push him away. You see, even negative attention from a beloved owner is better than nothing.

It is very important for dog owners to understand how dogs learn. Behaviors that are rewarded will continue to occur and may even increase in frequency. Even if the reward only comes 5 out of 10 times the dog exhibits the behavior. This variable reinforcement actually makes the behavior stronger. It's kind of like you are a giant walking slot machine and the dog becomes addicted to pulling your handle in hopes that he will eventually get the pay off. Jackpot!

The only way to get rid of these annoying attention-seeking behaviors is to completely remove the reward. Figure out what the dog gets out of the behavior (attention, food, going outside, etc.) and then take that away in response to the behavior.

An example is the annoying behavior of barking at you for attention. If the barking causes you to get up and walk out of the room (something he certainly doesn't want) then the behavior will no longer be rewarding. You will be taking away something good (your attention) in response to the unwanted behavior (barking). If done consistently the dog soon learns that barking no longer "works for him" to get attention. Dogs do what works for them - plain and simple.