

Article 24

Outside reinforcement distracts unwanted behavior

Dear Gus,

Friends of ours correct their dog's unwanted behavior using a squirt of water from a toy water pistol. It seems to instantly stop any bad behavior such as barking or digging. I'm wondering whether this technique would work when our 18-month-old German Shepherd ignores our commands?

Fred D, Orange

Dear Fred,

First, let me say that although this technique, which is called outside reinforcement, can be very effective, it is not a long-term substitute for obedience training. That said, water, or other methods such as rattling a can with pennies in it, or clanging metal food dishes together, will create a distraction for your dog so that you can introduce the proper behavior. What is happening here is that your dog is choosing to ignore your command because she is so involved with another behavior, such as barking at a deer, or digging for mice. Remember, your dog's hearing is many times more acute than yours, so it's not that she doesn't hear your command, it's that she is too focused on something else to obey. After all, she probably hears the deer walking through your yard, or your car coming up the street far before you would ever hear it. So, by breaking her focus on the unwanted behavior with the distraction, you can then introduce the desired behavior such as "come". The reason outside reinforcement is effective is that your dog lives in the present. She doesn't contemplate what she was doing five minutes ago, or what she will be doing five minutes in the future. So, when you distract her from the unwanted behavior, she is now able to focus on your command. Just be sure that if you use the squirt gun approach, all you are using is water. Under no circumstance should you use lemon juice, vinegar, or other solution in the water - your goal is to distract your dog from the unwanted behavior, not to cruelly punish her. So, use this technique temporarily as you continue to work with your dog on obedience training using positive reinforcement.

Gus

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