

How Do Dogs Learn?

Dogs Have the Ability to Solve Problems

Have you ever had or seen a dog who could open the latch on his kennel run? How did he learn to do it? First, he believed he had a problem: he was locked in and could not get out. Second, he was determined to solve his problem.

Let's pretend that you have just rescued a 60-pound mix breed. You take him home, and put him in the pen in your yard. He begins to bark, you look out the kitchen window, there is no one around his barking can bother, so you decide to ignore him.

Sure enough, the barking stops, and on another trip by the window you notice he is digging around the dog house, and near the gate. "You are wasting your time," you think, because you have placed wire under the gravel so digging is not effective.

A little later in the afternoon you notice he is on top of the dog house, checking out the cover, again finding no escape route.

Soon the silence disturbs you, and you look outside only to find him gleefully racing around the backyard. "He has broken out!" is your first response. You examine the run, but there is no evidence of a break out, the gate stands open. The dog is a problem solver, and he solved the problem of being confined when he did not want to be! You return him to the pen.

If you have ever experienced a dog that solved the problem of opening the latch on his kennel run, you know his second successful attempt at escape is quicker. He may bark, dig, and climb briefly, but soon he is back to jumping and pawing at the gate until he is out again.

This scenario proves for me that this dog, who believed he had a problem, solved his problem by trial and error. The dog tried barking, digging, and climbing before he arrived at a successful solution to his problem.

This scenario also demonstrates that unrewarded behavior will disappear. The dog did not continue to bark, dig, and climb. He gave up "solutions" that did not solve his problem.

Finally, this scenario points out that behavior precedes learning. The first time he opened the gate, he did it by accident. He did not understand exactly why he was successful, but on each successive attempt, he became more aware how he was opening the gate. Soon you cannot turn your back before he has systematically jumped up and lifted the latch.

This dog has learned how to open the latch on your pen. If he were in an identical pen in a different situation, he would open the latch fairly quickly. However, because dogs are situational if you were to put him in a pen with the gate in a slightly different location, he would be slowed down. This is the reason your obedience dog fails in a new location. Just because he knows, for example, where go-out is in one location does not mean he will know where it is in a new location.

If you understand that:

1. *dogs are problem solvers,*
2. *dogs learn by trial and error,*
3. *dogs stop behavior when it does not produce the desired reward,*
4. *dogs are situational, and*

5. dogs perform correctly prior to learning a task

you can use these facts to successfully train your own dog. With this information, you can present each obedience exercise as a problem for the dog to solve, and then help the dog discover the appropriate solution.

Responding to your dog's behavior:

As you teach your dog the steps necessary to learn the obedience exercises, he will respond correctly or incorrectly, and you must learn how to respond appropriately.

When the dog makes the correct choice you should respond with some form of positive reinforcement.

To be an effective dog trainer, it is important that you understand positive reinforcement. For our purposes, positive reinforcement is your happy and excited response to your dog's correct behavior. You should get in the habit of praising the dog with your voice (Good! Excellent! Wow!) when the behavior you desire occurs. You can (and sometimes should!) follow the praise with a toy, treat or game that the dog enjoys. Praise, treats, toys and games can all be forms of positive reinforcement.

Do NOT use praise in normal conversation ("You are such a good dog, do you want to go outside now?). Save the exclamations your dog perceives as praise for good performance!

When your dog responds incorrectly, the effective trainer tries to determine whether the dog was making an "effort error" or a "lack of effort error."

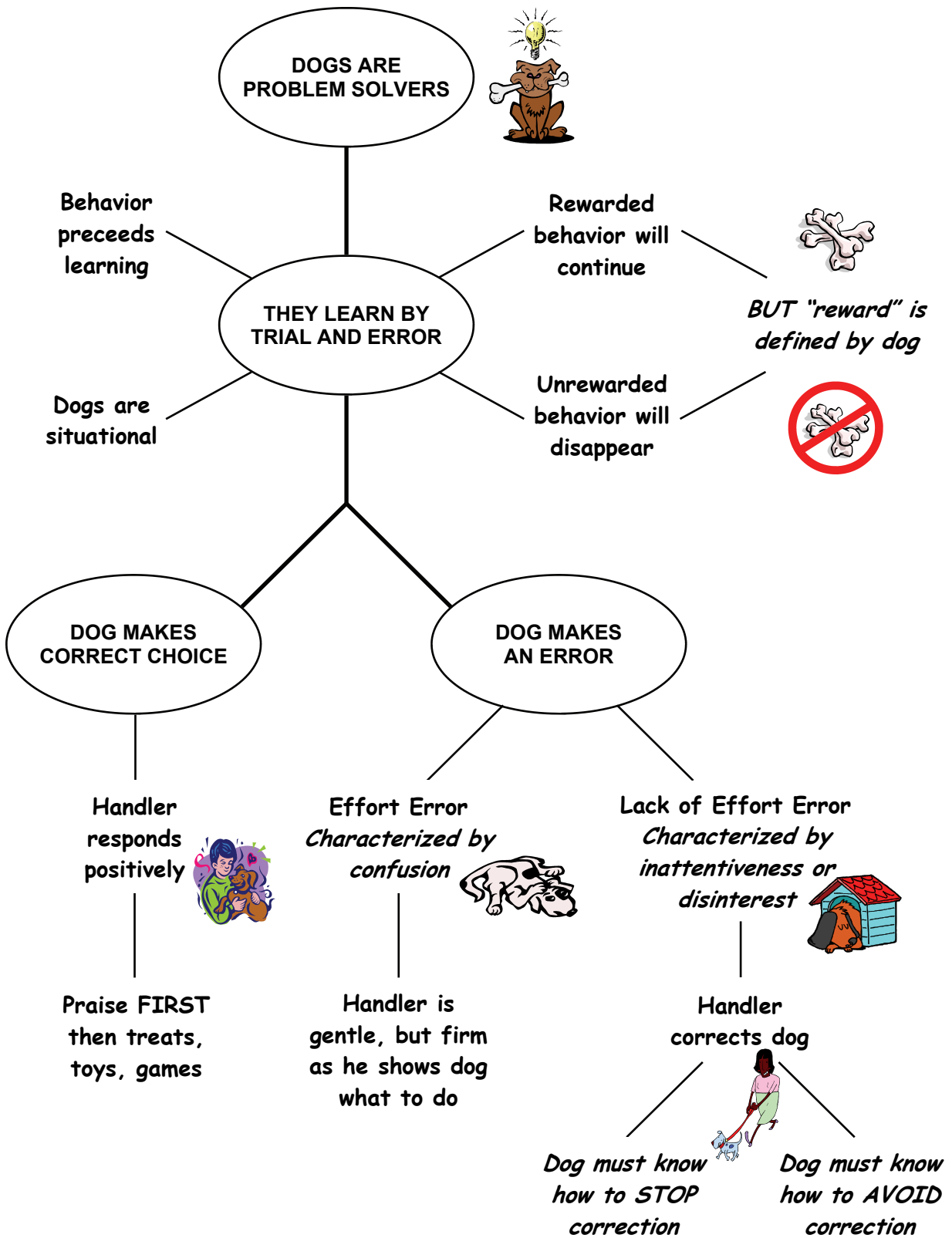
An effort error occurs when a dog is attentive and trying to do what you have asked, but makes a mistake. This error is characterized by confusion on the dog's part. This is an "honest error." You have compassion for a child who is trying to learn something and simply does not understand. Treat your dog the same way.

A dog who makes an effort error needs help from his handler. It is the handler's job to teach the dog the correct response. The handler should be gentle but firm as he shows the dog what to do. There will be times when the handler should simply put the dog in the correct position (i.e. The dog does not know how to sit, so the handler places him in a sitting position). There will be times when the handler leads the dog in the correct direction (i.e. Pointing the dog toward a dumbbell). There are also times when the handler needs to place the dog in a location necessary to try again (i.e. The handler takes the dog back to the location of go-out to attempt the directed jumping again).

Becoming an effective dog trainer involves learning how to be creative enough to help your dog understand what you want him to do. You are the teacher, your dog is the student. Becoming frustrated or angry when your dog makes an error is ineffective. You must learn how to communicate with him. These articles are designed to give you plenty of ideas about how to do just that!

A "Lack of Effort Error" occurs when your dog is not being attentive and not trying to do what you have asked. He may be distracted or disinterested. His lack of effort is the reason he makes a mistake.

To be an effective dog trainer, it is important that you understand the term correction. A correction is an unpleasant action that happens at the moment the dog stops trying to do what you have asked.



A correction is not a random act of violence! Good trainers teach their dogs how to control whether or not the correction occurs just as they teach them to earn praise and other rewards. ***A correction is something that the dog has learned how to stop and how to avoid.*** For example, if the only time you ever “pop” your dog’s leash is to get his attention, he should understand that he can stop the correction by looking at you. He should also understand that if he never looks away, you will not correct him.

There seems to be a lot of misinformation about corrections. Consider this: Are you afraid to iron clothes for fear of being burned? You know how to avoid being burned, and how to stop a burn if the iron touches you. In other words, you can control the correction (being burned). Your dog should feel as comfortable about any correction that you have taught him. He should not feel scared or intimidated because he controls it.

Things to Think About:

What does your dog do when he wants you to let him inside? Does he bark? Scratch? Jump on the door? Can you think of behaviors that he tried that you ignored and he subsequently gave up? Remember, dogs learn by trial and error.

Most dogs can be taught to be quiet in a crate by ignoring them because dogs stop behavior that does not produce the desired response. Likewise, do not forget to praise the most mundane tasks like straight sits, fronts and finishes. If you do, the dog will stop performing because the behavior is not rewarded!

How many different places do you train? If you always practice in the same location, your dog will become “situational” and may not perform as well in a new location.