

Set your Dog up for Success

Go-to Behaviors

What do you do when you're driving and the light ahead of you turns yellow? Do you speed up or slow down? Chances are, whatever it is, it's one of your go-to behaviors and you do it whenever you see a yellow light (for the most part). Most of us have go-to behaviors; behaviors we've practiced over and over so many times that they've become automatic and subconscious.

I used to date someone who whenever he heard the word "water," he'd say "well water used." It was so automatic that when I asked him where it had come from, he couldn't remember but said he'd said it since he was a kid. Go-to behaviors can be benign things or they can be coping mechanisms we use to get through tough situations. Whenever I'm stressed, I hum. I always hum the same song and typically have no idea I've started humming it but rather I realize as my patience is wearing that I've already begun the common tune; *Give the Dog a Bone*.

Go-to behaviors for our dogs are similar. They can be automatic responses to stimuli or they can be purposeful coping mechanisms meant to help them get through otherwise difficult situations.

For a year, I lived in a large, mountainous subdivision. Although the posted speed limit was 20, there wasn't any sidewalks or lights and hundreds of ponderosa pines which towered over and shaded everything. I walked the dogs off leash and allowed them to have 15' or so to smell and get their 'dog' out. When I began walking them, anytime I heard a vehicle, I said "car" and called them to me and had them stand, sit or walk on the inside with me on the road. It took less than a week for them to anticipate what was going to happen. At that point, I said "car" and looked down and they were all already on the inside, waiting to be acknowledged.

This go-to behavior; of getting to the inside of their person when a car approaches, can be a lifesaving behavior when out walking in a dark, wooded area, but there are many others to consider. The most popular one's I recommend are typically for either anxious or highly reactive dogs.

Go-to Behaviors

Puppy Pacifiers – these handy toys work terrific for a lot of dogs. Consider using an infant toy; a small stuffed animal made to clip to a kid seat, but instead clip it to your pup's collar. This is great for dogs who chew on their leashes, have a lot of anxiety and need something to do with it, or for those dogs who have a lot of energy and get excited on walks. Always supervise your dog when they have these.



Safe Spot – another favorite is to have your dog come and walk next to your leg while you pass whatever upsets them. Initially you'll need to encourage your dog to walk next to you, but if you create the right association and response, your pup will quickly pick up this behavior on their own and can also use it to cue you into their anxiety.

Get your ball – (Get your Toy) here we have dogs who come on too strong go get a toy or ball – this is great for dogs who bark or get overly excited when people come over.

Go to your place – similar to Get your ball, but here we're asking them to go to their bed or a specific location. (Be sure your pup can see what's going on when they have to go to their spot; it'll help them deal).

How to train/teach/show

First you need to determine what you want to use and focus on. If your pup hates toys, don't try to get him to love one for this, instead work on something else. If your dog cannot look away from something intimidating, don't make them look at you when a dog comes by, instead use it "See the puppy!?"

Depending on what we're teaching them, we need to

- 🐾 show them what you want
- 🐾 encourage them to do it
- 🐾 reward them when they do do it
- 🐾 practice – a lot, like 200+ times (and remind where needed)
- 🐾 Acknowledge with a treat on occasion

Examples

Bella's mom wants her to ring the bells by the door anytime she needs to go to the bathroom. In order to teach her this, we make the sure the bells can be reached by both mom and Bella and for one-week mom rings the bells every time Bella goes outside to go to the bathroom. After a week (give or take), mom waits at the time Bella would typically go out. Most dogs will throw a number of different behaviors to get our attention and when she investigates the bells (even a little) mom immediately opens the door and lets Bella out. As they continue to practice, mom is reminded to only respond to the bells when Bella typically needs to go out (so Bella doesn't outsmart us and start managing mom).

Dugan loves when kids come to his house but as much as he tries he can't help himself when they start running around, he has to join in. The problem is that he's a 75-pound chocolate lab who doesn't realize how strong he is or how his teeth and nails feel. Although his parents would really like him to go to his crate when the grandkids come over, it's not something he's comfortable doing and he cries and carries on if they lock him in. Instead, we taught him to grab a favorite toy, his purple dinosaur. It's a toy he adores, it's got more than one squeaker and he can make a lot of noise and carry on (at least at first). Everyone cheers whenever he does gets it and since he loves the attention he choses to do it over and over.