

## Impulse Control

Often the holidays can be as stressful for our pets as they are for us. With an increase in activities, preparations, and the thousands of miscellaneous details it's no surprise that the world seems to stop revolving around our animals for a time and instead is focused more on ourselves and our extended families.

The holidays also typically include changes to our routines, different types of foods smelling delicious in the house, company around and possibly out-of-town travel. All of this equals a significant amount of stress on our four-legged companions.

Some of the best ways we can help them avoid this stress is to give them quiet places to get away from the commotion – a bedroom, crate or yard can often do the trick. Also, it's important to keep their routines as normal as possible and to avoid additional stress to everyone by being sure they don't get into anything they shouldn't.

Many people are in a constant game of management with their pups; those crafty teeth causing us to store shoes on bookshelves, place baby locks on cupboards and ensure there is nothing on the kitchen counters - at any time. If this is your reality, it's time to implement some basic *Impulse Control* in your household.

*Impulse Control* is the term used to indicate the resisting of a temptation – whether that be for a second, an hour or forever. All of us have temptations after 'life happens to us...' – the guy cuts you off in the intersection – what's the first thought that comes to mind? Do you act on it? A store clerk is rude to the elderly woman in front of you – do you stand up for the woman or mind your own business? Or maybe you're one of those kids who are sitting with a piece of chocolate cake in front of them and told not to eat it – what do you do? What do you want to do?

I like to explain *Impulse Control* in dogs as that break between Impulse and Action. Many of us (and many dogs) have an immediate impulse but then we chose another action – we have a break between the two which allows us time to redirect ourselves. For other people – and some dogs, there is no break – they have an impulse - they act on it. These are the people who act in road rage situations or the dog that bites the hand that feeds them.

Those that have control; have an impulse – think about it – make a decision – then respond or act. There is a momentary break between the impulse and the action and this is what sets us (and our dogs) up for success. It's this break between impulse and action that we want to build into our pups to help them succeed in the world - and help you keep your sanity.



## How to Teach and Build Impulse Control

To teach your dog *Impulse Control* start with a tasty treat in one hand (I often use a large piece of hotdog) and a handful of smaller treats (be sure to use the same kind - hotdogs!) in your other hand. Have the hand with the one large treat closed and sitting on your lap in front of you, have your other hand behind your back. Tell your dog to Leave it! one time and wait them out:

- ✿ Some dogs will immediately get off the hand, others will paw at it, bite it, do everything they can to try to pry the treat lose....just wait, they'll get bored eventually
- ✿ As soon as the dog looks away from the hand, say Yes! and toss them a treat from the hand behind your back
- ✿ Repeat two more times then switch treats from hand to hand
- ✿ Repeat the activity with the large treat in each hand three times (by the time you do this a total of 6x your dog will be figuring out the game)
- ✿ Now make it a bit more difficult; place the large piece of treat on the floor with your fingers cupped over top of it and again say Leave it! one time and wait your dog out
- ✿ As soon as they come off the treat, acknowledge them and toss them a treat from the hand behind your back
- ✿ Repeat three times on each side of your dog

As they get better and better at this game, it's time to increase the challenge and ask them for more:

- ✿ If you want your dog to automatically sit, wait until they sit then toss them a treat and repeat over and over
- ✿ For hyper dogs or dogs who are waiting for an opportunity to get the Leave it! as soon as you look away - encourage them to actively pull away from the treat by acknowledging and treating any movement backwards or away. Note: toss the treat to the dogs here so they're not pulled toward the Leave it! for any reason

Practice this game for two to three days, a couple of times each day, in different settings; with food, pills you drop on the floor, their dinner, toys, their play partners, etc. For example: if you have a dog who loves to retrieve the ball, make him stand with you while you throw the ball, then after a few seconds, release him to Go! Find it! This is crazy difficult for many dogs at first but a great opportunity to reinforce and build *Impulse Control*.

Leave it! can be associated quickly by dogs to be used for any number of things including: a dog you're walking past, a skateboarder or cyclist, the friend they love to jump on, etc. Just practice it, in different settings, with different stimulus going past and while your dog is both stationary and moving.

Let's face it, most of us would like more self-control – so helping our dogs gain this ability can only be a good thing. Especially when it's the difference between letting your guard down and being able to relax in your own house (even if chicken is thawing on the counter). And remember, a few days or weeks of concentrated effort can give you and your dog years of fun and relaxing times.

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