

Ignorance may well be bliss!

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Sometimes the best thing to do may be...nothing at all

One of my favourite bits of video in my collection of canine behaviour, oddities and antics, is of my own Golden Retriever. While this may not be a surprise in itself, the fact that throughout the entirety of the clip he does, well, absolutely nothing, must put it into a fairly unusual viewing category. The reason for his inactivity is that he is devoutly, resolutely and completely ignoring another dog's inappropriate behaviour! The dog in question is a tiny terrier-cross puppy, and he is experimenting with some fun (from his point of view!) sexual behaviour towards Windsor. Clearly, mounting an adult Golden Retriever is not only wildly over-optimistic (think ant climbing mountain), but also highly inappropriate. Although this sort of behaviour is normal, it is the kind of thing that may get the little tyke into serious trouble in the park later on.

What makes the video so special is that my Goldie knows just what ignoring bad behaviour is all about. He stands completely still. He refuses to make eye contact – or even to turn to look at what's going on – and he blanks the puppy completely. Windsor knows that only complete ignoring will work in this situation and that any reaction is likely to make the behaviour more exciting for the puppy, not less. We could learn a thing or two from Windsor!

Owners are often told to ignore their dog's bad behaviour. Indeed, we are sometimes led to believe that ignoring is the panacea to all problem behaviour. Quite clearly, this is not the case. However, in many, many situations where any human response would actually act as a reward, no matter how punitive the response might be – ignoring can be a masterful and pro-active way of resolving the situation.

What is ignoring?

Truly ignoring a dog sounds so easy, and can be so difficult! The reason for this is that as social mammals humans are primed to look at and respond to unusual occurrences in our environment. So are dogs. This is often what makes the combination of dog action - human reaction - dog response, so very addictive.

Trying not to react when a dog barks at you, jumps up, steals a tissue or does 101 other things that we wish they wouldn't can be a feat of will power and an exercise in self-discipline. This has nothing to do with dog training, and everything to do with controlling our own (controlling!) impulses. What does it matter if the dog shreds a tissue on the carpet? The rational, sensible answer is 'not a jot', but the normal human one is more like 'It jolly does – I didn't just spend an hour hoovering just to have it messed up again by the dog in less than half a minute!' – or something very similar!

True ignoring is therefore an act. An Oscar-winning dramatic pretence of not caring, not seeing, not hearing or feeling what the dog is actually doing. To this end, saying only "Quit it" (as a signal) or something similar in a neutral tone and then turning your body language away from the dog works well. Folding your arms and looking away acts as a clear ignoring signal. In some cases, standing up, turning round and walking away from the dog – or even leaving the room altogether, and closing the door behind you, is necessary. Whatever you do, make it instant, make it dramatic and make it effective. Remember, ignoring is pro-active, not passive.

So, which behaviours can you ignore, and which need intervention?

The idea that you can simply ignore all behaviours that you don't like is as silly as thinking that dogs inherently know what the words 'No' or 'Ah, ah' mean. Quite clearly, there are some behaviours that

dogs would just love you to ignore, because they are fun and self-rewarding anyway, and they just want to carry on doing them. Behaviours in this category tend to include hard-wired behaviours such as digging, chasing and eating things! They are often breed or type specific too. This means that ignoring your Collie when he's chasing something is not going to make him less likely to do it, any more than ignoring a Labrador when he's eating something unspeakable that he's found in the woods is going to make him stop. These behaviours need interrupting, either by direct physical means, (not necessarily punitive) or by teaching alternative behaviours.

However, as Windsor has shown us, there are some behaviours which do respond well to being 'non-rewarded' or ignored. These are the ones that are directly linked to human attention.

Frosty is an adolescent white German Shepherd. Her owner has had various issues with her since she was a puppy, and has worked hard on these with good results. However, Frosty has developed a knack of knowing exactly what gets her owner going – and just how to push her buttons! In the past, Frosty has worked out that stealing certain items, such as tea towels and shoes, resulted in a good game of chase round the garden as her owner tried to get them back! However, as her owner got wise to these tactics for attention, she turned to more sophisticated strategies. At the moment, one of her favourite tricks is to bark at the front window. Of course, her owner thinks that there is someone there, and is surprised when she gets up out of her comfy armchair to look, only to discover that the street outside is empty and there is no one coming up the path. Meanwhile, Frosty happily dances around her – with what must surely be a huge grin on her face! After all, she's successfully taught her owner to get up, do a recall, target the curtains and look in a certain direction - all just by barking commands! Teaching Frosty's owner to ignore this behaviour has been a challenge, primarily because she finds it hard to believe that Frosty is really having her on ("Surely she barks because she can hear something outside – after all, their hearing is so much better than ours, isn't it?") and because it has become a habit for *her* to look at the dog, talk to her and respond to her when she performs the behaviour. However, two weeks of consistently getting up and walking the opposite direction from the front window whenever Frosty barks has already had a positive effect. Frosty's attempts to stir up a bit of action in this way are proving fruitless, and she's started to look for other, more appropriate ways of getting attention by fetching a toy instead, which her owner likes.

Dogs repeat behaviours which get rewarded. This simple adage is true whether the reward comes from us, the environment or the feeling of pleasure that the dog gets just from performing the behaviour. Ignoring unwanted behaviour can be effective, but only if it is done deliberately and with the dog's motivation in mind. As always, 'think dog' is the key!