

When to Manage, When to Train

By Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA

Not all unwanted behavioral habits in dogs require training solutions; sometimes, managing the dog's environment is the best way to stop bad behavior.

What if I told you that you could improve your dog's behavior without training him? That you could prevent him from doing many of the behaviors that you don't like – without any cues or treats or learning curves?

Well, these things are completely possible. You can accomplish these goals through management – the art of controlling your dog's environment to prevent him from being reinforced for behaviors you don't want. It's an incredibly valuable piece of any good training or behavior-modification program. Whether you are looking at a short-term or long-term management solution, the better you are at it, the easier it is for you and your dog to succeed.

In fact, management is the correct answer to most questions that are posed to professional dog trainers that begin, "How do I stop my dog from . . ." (fill in your dog's favorite inappropriate behavior here). In many cases, management is necessary while the dog learns a new, more appropriate behavior. In others, management offers a simple long-term solution or replaces unrealistic training expectations.

3 Steps to Modifying a Dog's Behavioral Habits

I offer my clients a three-step formula for reprogramming or preventing unwanted behaviors; management plays a big role in the formula.

Step #1 - Rephrase the issue: Identify what you want the dog to do instead of what you want him not to do.

Step #2 - Manage: Figure out how to prevent the dog from being rewarded for the unwanted behavior, because behaviors that are rewarded are reinforced; in other words, the dog is more likely to do them again. If you can prevent the dog from being rewarded, he will be less likely to do them again. Believe it or not, this step, the management part, is often the easiest step.

Step #3 – Train: Figure out how to consistently reward your dog for the desired behavior identified in the first step. This may be the hardest part, but it will be easier to accomplish because of your Step #2 efforts.

Here are some examples of how you might use the three-step process for dealing with several behaviors commonly cited by owners as annoying and undesirable.

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Examples of When Managing Your Dog is Better Than Training:

“How do I stop my dog from jumping up?”

1-Rephrase: “How do I teach my dog to greet people politely, by sitting, or at least by keeping all four feet on the floor?”

2-Manage: Control your dog’s environment to prevent her from being rewarded for jumping up on people. You can use the following tools:

A leash or tether to restrain her as people approach; allow them to feed her a treat and/or pet her only after she sits.

Crate, pen, closed doors, so when you can’t closely supervise her interactions with visitors, you can confine her to a safe area so she can’t practice her jumping-up behavior.

Education. Arm your visitors with information in advance of their first meeting with the dog so they know how to behave appropriately in response to her jumping up.

Exercise, because tired dogs tend to be better-behaved dogs.

3-Train: Consistently reward her for sitting when she greets people. Use “negative punishment” (dog’s behavior makes a good thing go away) by turning away or stepping away when she tries to jump up. (See “Training Your Dog Not to Jump Up,” WDJ December 2009.)

“How do I stop my dog from going potty in the house?”

1-Rephrase: “How do I teach him to go to the bathroom outside?”

2-Manage: Prevent him from being rewarded for peeing on the carpet. A full bladder causes discomfort; urinating relieves that discomfort. Urinating on the carpet is more rewarding for an un-housetrained dog than suffering the discomfort of “holding it” until he can go outside. Use the following tools:

Veterinary consultation. You will need a veterinarian to rule out any possibility of a urinary tract infection or gastrointestinal problem.

Frequent trips outside (like, once an hour). Take the dog outside so frequently that his bladder/bowels are never full to the point of discomfort (every hour on the hour, at least at first).

Crate, pen, or tether (use the latter only when you are home). Use these tools during the times when you can’t supervise him closely enough to prevent him from soiling the carpet when you’re not paying attention. Keeping his crate unsoiled is more rewarding to most dogs than relieving even a moderately full bowel or bladder.

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Close supervision. When your dog is in the house and not in a crate, pen, or tether, you must pay attention to him. You need to be able to notice when he acts restless (a sign that he has to eliminate) and take him outside quickly, before he has a chance to relieve himself on the carpet.

3-Train: Implement a full housetraining program that includes going outside with him regularly and rewarding him with praise and a treat immediately after he goes to the bathroom in the appropriate toilet spot.

“How do I keep my dog from chewing up my shoes, books, furniture, etc.?”

1-Rephrase: “How do I get her to chew on her own things and only her own things?”

2-Manage: Prevent her from being rewarded for chewing on inappropriate objects. Things like shoes, books, and furniture have a nice firm-but-giving texture that feels good (is rewarding) to a dog’s teeth and gums, especially to a puppy or young dog who is teething. You have a lot of tools available for managing this behavior:

Picking up and putting away non-chew objects when your dog is in the room.

Removing her from the room when non-chew objects must be left within dog-reach (or putting her in a crate or pen, or on a tether or leash if necessary).

Supervising the dog closely and distracting her from inappropriate objects with offers of appropriate chew items.

Exercising her a lot; tired dogs tend to be well-behaved dogs.

3-Training: Provide her with irresistible objects specifically for chewing, food-stuffed Kongs, and other safe items. If she is given the opportunity to chew only acceptable items, she will eventually develop a strong preference for chewing on these things and your personal possessions will be safe. (See “Dogs and Puppies Chew for a Number of Reasons,” August 2007.)

“How do I stop my dog from chasing joggers (or cats, bikes, livestock, or deer)?”

1-Rephrase: “How do I teach my dog to stay with or return to me in the presence of fast-moving objects?”

2-Manage: Don’t let her have the opportunity to be rewarded for chasing. And don’t have unrealistic training expectations; that is, don’t expect to be able to train a dog who finds “chase” very reinforcing to “not chase” in the absence of containment. This includes most of the herding breeds, terriers, hounds, and sporting breeds. With these dogs especially, use those management tools:

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Fences – that is, solid physical fences of sufficient height. These are great tools for thwarting chasing behaviors.

Doors that keep your dog safely confined indoors except when directly supervised can go a long way toward preventing rewards for chasing.

Leashes and long lines are ideal for preventing chase rewards.

Exercise – in this case, on a leash or long line, or in a securely fenced area. Tired dogs tend to be well-behaved dogs. Tired dogs tend to have happy owners.

3-Train: Teach your dog a very reliable recall. Train her to drop to a down at a distance. Teach her a solid “Wait” cue that will pause her in mid-stride, even when she is in chase mode. (See “Training a Fast Reliable Recall,” September 2012.)

“How do I keep my dog from roaming?”

1-Rephrase: “How do I keep my dog safe at home?”

2-Manage: Use appropriate physical means to keep him safely confined at home and make sure he never experiences and reaps the rewards of the “joy” of running loose in the neighborhood.

I occasionally have potential clients call and ask me how to train their dogs to stay on their property without a fence and without a human present. This is an unrealistic training expectation, and I never accept such a training assignment; I don’t believe it can be done safely and humanely. For most, if not all dogs, there are stimuli that are strong enough to induce them to break through the shock of an electric fence collar simple boundary-training program. This is a case where management tools are indispensable:

Solid physical fences of sufficient height. (See “Installing Safe and Affordable Dog Fencing,” May 2009.)

Doors. Keep him safely confined indoors except when directly supervised, to prevent him from being rewarded for roaming.

Leashes and long lines; physical restraint tools are ideal for preventing roaming rewards. (Note: We do not recommend tying or chaining a dog as a routine method of outdoor confinement.)

Neutering. Lowering a dog’s testosterone level can be an effective way of eliminating one very strong motivation for roaming.

Exercise; tired dogs tend to be well-behaved dogs.

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3-Train: Teach your dog a very reliable recall. Train him to drop to a down at a distance. Teach him a solid “Wait” cue that will pause him in mid-stride, even when he is in chase mode. And then never leave him outdoors alone, unfenced, and unsupervised.

“How do I make my dog stop stealing food from the table or counter?”

1-Rephrase: “How do I get him to only eat things that are in his bowl or on the floor?”

Dogs are opportunistic eaters by their very nature. They are morally incapable of “stealing” food. A dog in the wild who eats food when and where he finds it is smart – and much more likely to survive than one who passes food by just because it happens to be above eye level.

2-Manage: Clearly, the food that he finds on counters tastes good and is very rewarding. Prevent him from being rewarded for counter-surfing by never leaving food on the counter, or leaving your dog unsupervised in a room with food on a table (even for a minute).

Use the following management tools:

Closed doors. If food must be left out, shut the dog in another room so he can’t have access to it.

Cupboards. Put food away! Never leave it out as an invitation to counter-surf.

Crates, pens, leashes, and tethers; these are all reasonable means of restraint to prevent his access to food you don’t want him to have.

Exercise; tired dogs tend to be well-behaved dogs.

3-Train: Teach him a positive “Leave It!” or “Walk Away!” cue and consistently reward him for ignoring food on the counter and for keeping all four feet on the floor around food-laden counters and tables. Reinforce him generously for lying on his “mat” in food areas, so he learns to offer his “mat” behavior in the presence of food. (See “5 Things to Do the Next Time Your Dog Grabs Your Stuff and Runs,” January 2011, and, “How to Teach Your Dog to Trade,” February 2017.)

We could keep going, but you should be getting the idea by now. Any time you’re faced with a behavior challenge, just apply these three simple steps – rephrase, manage, and train – to design your action plan for managing and/or modifying the inappropriate behavior.

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Management Will Simplify Your Life

Then there are those cases where it makes far more sense simply to manage the environment to prevent the behavior from happening, without investing time and energy into the training end.

My all-time favorite management story was the Peaceable Paws client in Carmel, California, who asked me to teach his Australian Shepherd-mix to stop drinking out of the toilet.

I told him that it would be far easier to teach him (the supposedly more intelligent species) to close the toilet lid or shut the bathroom door, than it would be to train the dog not to take advantage of a constantly fresh water source. “In fact,” I told him, “your dog is probably trying to figure out how to train you to stop peeing in his water bowl!” This was one of those cases where it made much more sense to implement a simple management technique than to expend the energy required to train the desired behavior.

He got the message. When I visited the house for our next appointment, the bathroom door was securely closed.

Criticism of the Behavior Management Method

Some dog-training professionals speak poorly of management. Far more times than I care to count I've heard trainers say, “Management always fails.” What they mean is, as just one example, if you are relying on baby gates and doors to keep your cat-chasing dog from scaring or hurting your elderly cat, there is a good chance that, at some point, someone will fail to completely close a door or gate.

I cringe every time I hear this. In my world, management is a critically important piece of a successful training program and can also be key to successful long-term living with canine behavior challenges. There are many dogs who have lifelong loving homes thanks in part, at least, to a well-designed and implemented behavior management plan. It worries me to hear anyone discourage dog owners from using management tools and plans.

Of course, that doesn't mean we forego training altogether. There are many circumstances where we manage behavior until we succeed in training or modifying behavior, and there are times when we choose to manage for the life of the dog.

Management can have a high potential for failure, and whether we choose management as a long-term or just short-term solution depends on two things:

1. The likelihood of management failure
2. The consequences if management does fail

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If the likelihood of management failure is low and consequences are minor, then management can be a realistic solution. The higher both factors rise, the more important it is to work to modify your dog's behavior rather than relying on a lifetime of management.

Likelihood of Management Failure

There are a number of factors that determine likelihood of management failure in any given circumstance. These include:

- Number of humans in the household. The more humans, the greater the chance someone will slip up.
- Children in the household.
- Humans (adult or child) in the home who aren't committed to the management plan, or worse, who deliberately seek to subvert the management plan.
- Level of activity in the home. The more chaotic the environment, the greater the likelihood of a management "oops."
- Dog's determination. The more persistent and determined your dog is to overcome management efforts, the more likely he is to succeed.

Consequences of Behavior Management Failure

If you are managing a counter-surfer and management fails, perhaps you lose the peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich you left on the counter, or worse, the holiday Tofurkey. But if you are managing a dog who doesn't do well with children, you could end up with a mauled child – or worse.

www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/21_2/features/Dog-Behavior-Management-vs-Training_21785-1.html

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