

CORRECTING YOUR CANINE

By Joann M. Locher, M.S.

A positive approach to modifying unwanted behavior in dogs is most desirable. The environment should be totally puppy-proofed to prevent mistakes: either remove valuables from reach, or treat things with repellents such as pepper or bitter products. The dog should be monitored whenever possible, so it will learn what it can and cannot do. When left alone, it should be properly confined in a safe, comfortable area.

However, some mistakes which dogs make (such as digging, escaping, destructive chewing and housebreaking accidents) are so self-rewarding that correcting them can be quite a challenge. Special measures must be taken to retrain the animal. The key to eliminating these unwanted, persistent behaviors is to convince the dog that such conduct is unpleasant, unrewarding, or unsafe.

The usual corrections which pet owners try result in failure and frustration for a number of reasons. Measures are used which do more to contaminate the owner/dog relationship than to remedy the problem behavior. For instance: hitting the dog with a newspaper, locking the dog up for a time, scolding, or rubbing the dog's nose in "it". All of these teach the dog to avoid the owner when he first comes home, until his mood can be read or, even worse, to not come when called.

The owner should strive to correct the behavior. This means that the behavior correction must coincide with the error, so as to achieve a correction with a connection. The dog should associate the unwanted behavior with something unpleasant, so he will strive to avoid both.

The owner should either set booby traps or practice gorilla warfare, so that the unpleasantness or correction will be associated with the mistake, and not with the owner. One could rig an avalanche, using soda cans containing a few pennies to increase the startle effect. These cans could be placed on a cardboard and propped up precariously where the dog should not go, such as near the trash or on the sofa. For the food stealer, the cans could be on a row of paper towels carefully placed on the edge of the counter.

Lying in wait for the offender is often effective. When the fence jumper is midair, bombard him with bean bags. Every time the excessive barker makes a sound, subtly squirt a stream of water at him. As the dog begins to dig, make a loud clatter. One wants the dog to think, "Every time I dig (or chew...or escape...or bark...) lightning strikes. Boy, I'm not doing that again. It's just not worth it!"

All of these diabolical tricks possess the qualities of an ideal correction: a) the timing is impeccable, so there will be no confusion as to what is the real issue; b) undesirable behavior becomes unpleasant for the dog; c) they allow the owner to remain the "good guy".

One final note: corrections should correct! They should not be a nagging, ongoing process which never ends. If a correction needs to be repeated, it didn't work. Since dogs vary in sensitivity, what works like a charm for one, may not even phase another. Put on your thinking cap and try something else, or increase the intensity of the measure taken.