

Contextual cues and signal cues

There are two kinds of “cues”. One is a contextual cue. The other is a signal cue. It is important that you know about both of them so that you can use them wisely.

What is a contextual cue?

A contextual cue is a specific circumstance or situation that cues or solicits a particular response from the dog. The dog learns contextual cues on his own.

What is a “signal” cue?

Signal cues are either verbal cues such as “Watch”, “Sit” and “Come” or they are hand gestures. You must take an active role in teaching your dog signal cues.

How does the dog learn contextual cues?

Here is an example of how the dog learns a contextual sit cue. When you go to feed your dog, you ask your dog to sit. Every time you bring out his food dish you ask your dog to sit. Soon enough your dog automatically sits when the food dish appears. The food dish becomes a contextual situation or cue for the dog to sit.

Your dog can develop a huge repertoire of contextual cues to sit. Does the dog go and sit at the door when he sees you pick up his leash? Then that is another contextual cue for sit. Each new situation where the sit response is self-initiated and self-reinforcing for the dog becomes another contextual situation that cues the sit response.

You are not taking an active role by teaching or cueing the dog to sit in any of these examples. Most dog owners are not aware that this type of learning is taking place.

To the inexperienced owner, the dog is doing a lot of sitting. He seems to have a good understanding of the concept of sit. But the real fact is that although he is learning to sit he is learning to sit only in those contexts and therefore only on those contextual cues. The dog has not learned to sit on a verbal or hand signal from you.

The dog will develop many contextual cues quickly and easily and will respond to them with the utmost reliability. This is both good and bad. Good for the owner because the dog can be depended upon to perform beautifully under a specific set of circumstances, such as sit calmly at the door to have his leash put on. But is bad if the owner thinks that the dog knows how to sit on a verbal or hand signal cue. Without being taught the dog would fail at the verbal or hand signal cue because the response is out of context. It is then especially bad for the dog if his owner gets angry because the owner thinks the dog is being bad and refusing.

How does your dog learn signal cues?

Unlike a contextual cue system which the dog learns on his own, you must take an active role in teaching the dog his signal cue system.

How are signal cues taught?

The dog is enticed into performing the desired response on a voluntary basis. He is then heavily reinforced or rewarded for performing the response. Once he is aware of what he is doing, he is taught a signal cue that predicts he will get rewarded for performing that response. Also, a variety of management procedures and devices are used to prevent any unwanted responses from occurring or being self-reinforced.

Why It Is Important To Teach your dog A Signal Cue?

It is important to note that dog owners want and need a good, reliable signal cue system so that no matter where they are or what is happening, they can signal their dog to respond in an appropriate or desirable way. A contextual cue system is all well and good for familiar situations, but is of no use when you need a response out of context.

So if you want the dog to be able to sit when you go to the park, visit a friend, or go to the vet, he must be taught how to sit/maintain on a signal cue.

Why The Dog Only Knowing A Contextual Cue Creates Problems

At home the dog does come running to you for his dinner. But this does not mean that when the dog is running around off leash at the park you can successfully signal him to come to you. He would need knowledge of a verbal or hand signal to do that. You will have to work hard at teaching and rehearsing these signals in order for him to be reliable no matter where you are or what is happening.

If it is not your desire to spend time teaching signal cues be aware that your dog will never be able to reliably perform the behaviors you need out of context.