

## DISTRACTIONS BY AMY & JOHN DAHL

"I don't understand! He always does this perfectly at home!"

Have you ever said this about your dog? If so you're not alone. And this article can help you both to understand why that's so and to get your dog to behave wherever you want him to. It won't happen instantly, but we presume that if you've taught your dog a few commands, maybe taken an obedience class, you'll be willing to do a little more to expand his training.

When we set out to train a dog, it's easy to be so intent upon the goal we have in mind that we think the dog knows that goal is as well. But the dog has his own perspective and doesn't automatically know what we have in mind. To get him trained, we need to teach him, not just what actions go with which commands, but what we expect from him in the way of compliance.

Distractions are the key to reliable obedience. And distraction is something that tends to turn your dogs attention from you. When he is ignoring you, of course, he will not obey. You can, however, teach your dog to keep his attention on you by employing distractions in a controlled manner as you train him.

Beginning obedience training is oriented to communicating to your dog that certain actions go with particular commands. There is plenty to learn in this area, and it can be fun learning to time rewards and corrections in order to get enthusiastic responses from your dog. If you have practiced obedience with your dog, you have probably noticed that he cooperates better and seems to learn faster when there are few distractions. You are in a familiar environment, usually your house or backyard, and there's nothing to excite your dog - no children playing, visitors, other dogs running around, -and so forth. Under these circumstances, it is easy to get and keep his attention and to maintain interest in the lesson. That's the first thing to know about distractions: dogs learn better when there are none (or as few as possible).

In life, of course, distractions are many and not always predictable. We would like our dogs to be obedient and respond to our commands when we give them, no matter what else happens to be going on. The other point to know about distractions is that we can use them in training to build reliability. To begin with, we need to recognize that the command words we use, those all-important sounds that we intend to control our dog's behavior, are just one stimulus among many from the dog's point of view.

Think of it this way: suppose you train your lab by himself in the basement. Maybe you start by teaching him to sit; that is, you put his leash on, get him at your left side in heeling position, associate the word "sit" with his sitting, and let him know that you are pleased when he responds correctly to the word. Now he knows what "sit" means, right?

Not really. Your dog associates your pleasure with the fact that he is sitting - at your side, with the leash on, in the basement, with nobody else around, and with the spoken word,

Try saying, "Sit!" when he is in front of you. If he understood the command, he would plant his rear end on the floor where he is. Few pups will do that; some will walk to your side and then sit ("Boss, you forgot to get me in position first, but it's okay; I'll do it"), but most will ignore the word. To the dog, it only has meaning when he is at your side.

It's the same when you leave the basement, or when somebody else is there, or maybe even when the TV is on. The conditions don't convey to him the requirement of sitting. And at home, when he's not wearing the leash and some interesting stranger comes to the door, forget it. Try saying, "Sit," and if he remembers your basement exercise at all, it'll be to think "sit" is just a sound to be ignored outside of his training sessions.

We can change this. There are plenty of dogs who respond reliably to commands in a variety of situations in the face of powerful temptations. Yours can, too. The key is teaching the dog to generalize - to respond to the command in a variety of circumstances until he associates word and action, wherever he happens to be. This is mainly a matter of re-teaching the cues in several different, not too exciting circumstances. Your dog will recognize that certain words are the universal cues, the only thing that is always part of the picture. When your dog makes this breakthrough, you will be able to take him to a new place, say, "Sit," and he will.

Yes, we did say (no-too-exciting.) There's more, your dog may understand that the cue is the only indication he needs to perform and action, but if something comes along that interests him more than your obedience routines, he is likely to ignore your commands. This is normal. Until you teach him otherwise, your dog will establish his own hierarchy regarding what is worthy of his attention. Typically, slow-paced activities such as obedience will lose out to the excitement of a romp with another dog, a chance to greet someone, chasing squirrels, or playing 'with the kids. Don't take this personally. It is not a reflection of how much your dog loves you, your worthiness as his master, or anything except that playing is fun! The' next task is to promote obedience through the hierarchy until your dog pays attention to you above all, no matter how appealing the temptations.

The way to become your dog's primary concern, and hence to have him reliably obedient, is not to get rid of all distractions, but rather by employing distractions in your training. Once you have taught him two or three exercises and he does them well in the absence of distractions, you can review the exercises in a mildly distracting situation. Insist, by established means, that he respond promptly. Work around different distractions, gradually increasing the level of challenge. Gradual increments in temptation enable your dog surmount these obstacles without conflict. Remember, dogs learn through repeating the right behavior, not getting it wrong and being corrected.

Be creative in using distractions. No doubt you have also worked other cues, such as coming when called. You can practice these around distractions, too. Just be sure not to give commands at times when they cannot be enforced, or your dog will learn that certain distractions constitute permission to ignore you.

Good distractions include people talking, children playing (but these people should not call your dog by name or touch him), small animals in a cage, birds at a bird feeder, open car doors, appealing food items, horses or other livestock, other dogs, unfamiliar scents and breezes that may carry interesting smells and bouncing or thrown balls. If your dog is ball crazy, you will have to start with very short, low tosses at first to give him practice-resisting temptation, not falling for it! Invent your own distractions.

New locations are distracting, because your dog will want to devote his attention to exploration. Dogs want to know all about their surroundings. The more that is going on, the greater the challenge to his attractiveness. Many pet stores nowadays will allow you to take your dog into the store. This is a very distracting environment. If you want a reliable obedient dog, take advantage of this opportunity. Practice your dog commands at the pet store and at the vet's office. His good manners will attract favorable attention (you might want to teach him a couple of cute tricks for the entertainment of his admirers).

The greatest challenge in obedience is to overcome an established behavior problem. On the Just Labs on-line bulletin board ([www.iustlabsmagazine.com](http://www.iustlabsmagazine.com)), for example, several readers have written about their dogs' bad manners at the front door when guests arrive. Dog nature is to enjoy the excitement of meeting people, and if a dog has had numerous chances to misbehave at the door, his bad habits have been well rewarded. For a problem of this kind, you need to change the rules. You will use all you have done to teach responsiveness in the face of distractions, plus design a setup to address the specific issue. By using an accomplice who will come to the door at a prearranged time (so you can have a leash on your dog), and who will act as unexciting as possible (at first), you can manage the level of temptation. Since your friend knows you will be training your dog, you will not be distracted but can concentrate on enforcing your dog's obedience.

If your dog sits nicely on command and stays there without jumping up, you can have your accomplice come forward, greet him, and give him a treat. If not, have your friend retreat while you get the dog back into a sitting position. Repeat the setup a few times, and then switch to a different accomplice. During this time, make sure your dog doesn't have any opportunities to misbehave around visitors. Confine him when guests arrive until he has learned the new rules - rewards come for sitting still, not for jumping up.

The path to ultimate reliability is not a short one, but it isn't mysterious, either. If you've taught your dog some basic obedience commands, you've done the hard part. Working through a series of distractions can be fun. You will be able to take your dog places and bask in the admiration he will draw, and you will come to understand him better. You'll be rewarded by his attention shifting to you when something enticing presents itself and finally, you'll have the ultimate reward of a "go anywhere" dog who can be relied upon to mind his manners. Not everyone will choose to do the work, but we think it's worth it.