

# Slow Dog Training

Be your dog's best friend



Spring 2016

## Listen Up! Successful learning requires focus

Are you frustrated because your dog seems to ignore you? Do you occasionally - or even regularly - raise your voice to get your dog's attention?

Don't get trapped in a cycle of escalating anger and repetitive futile attempts to gain control. With a better understanding of your dog's behaviour and a clear plan you can transform your dog to become more attentive and eager to learn. In fact, your dog may never want to take their eyes off you.

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## Is Your Dog Anxious? How to find out and what to do about it

Dogs can suffer from fear, stress and anxiety just like we can. While we will never know how our canine friends experience anxiety, we can identify the



signs both externally through their body language and internally by measuring physiological changes in their bodies. We know their fears and anxieties are real but, sadly, their suffering is all too often ignored or goes undetected.

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### Companionship

Being your dog's best friend means paying attention to how they feel. Page 3.

### Exercise

Tug-of-war: Why it's a great game and why you need rules. Page 2.

### Training

Three essential components to get better focus from your dog. Page 2.

### Science says

The scientific study of animal learning and dog behaviour is both fascinating and important. It gives us the tools to teach our dogs and change their behaviour efficiently and humanely. However, reading scientific studies can be challenging and the people who summarise them into easily digestible articles might not always get it right. With awareness and critical thinking you can save your animal friend and yourself from misleading and bad information.

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### The "Fear free vet"

A new initiative to deliver enjoyable vet visits for everyone involved. Soon coming to a neighbourhood near you?

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Dog Training & Behaviour Consulting  
[www.crosspaws.com.au](http://www.crosspaws.com.au)

# Listen Up!

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Good professional teachers and trainers know that motivation is an essential component in learning and behaviour change. They also know that impatience and coercion are the enemy. Every individual wants to have control over their own lives and make their own decisions. It promotes confidence, initiative and happiness and prevents depression, lethargy, frustration and aggression. We also sometimes want to feel in control of others in our lives but this attitude risks denying others the right to make their own choices. So how can we achieve the “control” we crave over our companion animals without robbing them of self-determination and the happiness that comes with it? After all, our dogs are entirely dependent on us for their entire lives. They need us to make choices for

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them and we need them to follow our guidance so they can successfully live in a human world.

The answer is that we teach our dogs with non-coercive methods and reward them generously for the behaviours we like to see more of. As humans we can push ourselves through a gruelling fitness program because we have that distant vision of a fitter and healthier self. Even then, we usually need some intermittent rewards to keep us going. Dogs on the other hand do not have distant goals.

Their motivation relies largely on what they can gain right here, right now. A dog's behaviour is of course highly influenced by memory: If a specific behaviour paid off in the past, the dog is more likely to engage in the



behaviour in the future. It is our job to make sure those memories - or “histories of reinforcement” - are in our favour. This means find out what your dog absolutely loves and when (e.g. roast chicken when they are hungry and exercised, playing fetch when they haven't had a run for a while) and use those things to reward the behaviours you want.

Apart from using high value rewards that your dog loves, you also need to be mindful of your dog's skill level and the environment before you ask your dog to do something. If your dog is highly distracted, don't bother trying to get compliance unless your dog is already very advanced in their training. You can't expect someone to hit an ace if they have only just learned how to hold a tennis racket. Just like a fitness program, your dog's training is a step-by-step endeavour. They will get better with practice, but only if you don't ask too much of them too early and work with a plan. Until then it's best to manage your dog, so they don't get into trouble. For example, if you haven't taught your dog to reliably come when called, don't let them off lead near a busy road, a playground or wherever they shouldn't go.

Using high value rewards and a carefully designed step-by-step plan that allows your dog to frequently access those rewards will very quickly turn your dog into a training junkie.

## How to get better focus from your dog

### Motivation

Every single living being needs motivation to engage in behaviours. It's a biological fact, not a moral issue. Your best options are tasty food, play and toys and access to whatever the dog wants right now, e.g. sniff at a tree.

### Training plan

Teaching and learning work best when you follow a plan. Break down the behaviour you want your dog to master into manageable steps and teach each step separately. That way your dog can have frequent success, i.e. earn frequent rewards, and will enjoy the training.

### Technical skills

Successful teaching requires knowledge of animal learning, good timing and observational skills, patience and empathy for the student. A good qualified trainer or a good book can help you become a better trainer.

## Tug-of-war rules

Tug-of-war can be a very rewarding and energy burning game for your dog. It also helps to strengthen the bond between you and your dog, making your dog more motivated to seek out your company and pay attention to you. However, a few rules should be established to make the game safe for everyone. Every time your dog breaks those rules, stop playing and walk away, at least for a short while.

- The dog only grabs the toy on cue, e.g. "take it".
- The dog drops the toy on cue, e.g. "give".
- The dog does not put teeth on skin.

Initially, you can offer a treat in exchange for the toy to teach "give" or you can "make the toy dead" by holding it still between your knees. Make sure your dog never snatches the toy out of your hand. If they grab it before you give the cue, simply walk away and don't engage.

## Is Your Dog Anxious?

Continued from page 1.

Dogs can develop anxieties for a number of reasons. A big one is lack of socialisation between 3 weeks and roughly 12 weeks of age. A dog who hasn't had lots of positive experiences with a large variety of things that make up our human world – all those different people and animals, noises, machines and gadgets, environments and smells – has little chance to become a happy, confident and emotionally well-balanced dog. Then there are traumatic experiences such as accidents, attacks or abuse. Depending on the severity and timing (puppyhood, adolescence or adulthood), even a well socialised dog may struggle to bounce back. Genetics always play a role too. Just like in humans, some individuals can deal with trauma better than others. It's the luck of the draw.

Fear and anxiety inhibits rational thinking. It means your dog's behaviour is largely controlled by their emotions with very little input from the cognitive part of their brain. Your dog is physically unable to respond to you as they normally would and may not follow your instructions or encouragement. Their brain is in fight, flight or freeze mode and entirely focussed on self-preservation. Any attempt to force your dog to do something will most certainly worsen your dog's condition and exacerbate their anxiety, possibly leading to aggression in an act of self defence. Your dog may love you dearly, but if they are afraid, do not hold them responsible for their actions and never take things personally. Your dog has neither the cognitive nor moral

capacity to understand that you are trying to help them or that there is no need to be afraid. Their brain simply responds to the overwhelming emotions of danger. No human words or actions of love or wisdom can override the evolutionary stronghold of survival instinct.

So what can you do to help your dog? First of all, you have to recognise that your dog is indeed anxious. This isn't always easy. Fidgety behaviour is often interpreted as the dog being excited or impatient; a wagging tail is automatically linked to a happy dog; and a dog who doesn't move much may be thought to be relaxed. To get an idea of what's really going on, look at your dog's entire body and assess it in relation to the current context. Is your dog avoiding eye contact? Are their movements slow and stiff or fidgety and erratic? Are they panting or drooling, scratching or grooming, yawning or licking excessively or without any obvious reason? Does your dog get aggressive?

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If you see signs of fear, anxiety or stress, the immediate course of action is to remove your dog from the stressor.

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Create distance between your dog and whatever makes them feel



uncomfortable. For example, if you have visitors in the house that make your dog feel anxious, move your dog to another room where they can be undisturbed; if you have young children, make sure they do not tease your dog, respect the dog's choice to walk away and do not invade the dog's resting place; avoid dog parks if your dog is worried around other dogs and never force your dog to endure being touched by strangers.

The next step is to work on a systematic desensitisation and counter-conditioning program to help your dog form new and more positive associations with whatever worries them. It is best to contact a qualified dog trainer or veterinary behaviourist to get expert advice on how to do this.

Also check out these excellent sites:

[fearfuldogs.com](http://fearfuldogs.com)  
[careforreactivedogs.com](http://careforreactivedogs.com)  
[web.facebook.com/groups/fearfuldogs](https://web.facebook.com/groups/fearfuldogs)

### Is your dog OK? Signs to watch out for

Dogs who are fearful, anxious or stressed tell us so through their body language. It is worth paying attention to your dog's behaviour both for their emotional and physical welfare and to prevent escalation.

Dilated pupils    Whale eye    Hard eye    Ears flat    Ears out to the side or far forward  
Mouth tightly closed or panting    Lips pulled back or short    Lip licking    Yawning  
Tail tucked or low and wagging or high above the topline    Turning away    Moving away  
Scratching    Shaking off    Tense body    Crouching    Trembling    Looking away  
Pacing    Sniffing ground    Grooming    Paw lift    Lip lift    Growl    Snarl    Bite

# The Fear Free Vet

The future of veterinary care has arrived



Is your dog stressed, anxious or outright terrified when you take them to the vet? Change is coming. There is no need for patients to experience fear and stress. In fact, it is not just

unhealthy for the patient and potentially stressful for the human client and vet staff. It is also a hindrance to veterinary examinations and treatment.

An initiative by American vet Dr Marty Becker gives individuals involved in animal care the opportunity to get certified in fear free handling,

This is great news for stressed animals, their humans and the professionals working with animals, such as vets, groomers and trainers.

So far, only a handful of vets in Australia have been certified but the number is likely to grow fast. The benefits are simply too great to ignore. A standardised, more considerate, humane and intelligent approach to handling our animal companions has been long overdue. Let's hope that it has a flow on effect to other areas such as dog walking, training and grooming. It would make a lot of dogs a lot happier, more relaxed and less prone to display problem behaviours.

Check out the fear free initiative here: [www.fearfreepets.com](http://www.fearfreepets.com)

[www.companionanimalpsychology.com/2016/04/less-stress-at-vet-for-dogs-and-cats.html](http://www.companionanimalpsychology.com/2016/04/less-stress-at-vet-for-dogs-and-cats.html)

## Science says

How to evaluate 'scientific' news about your animal companions.

Science is super important. Without it we would still believe that the earth is flat, think that eating pasta makes us fat and face certain death if we came down with the measles.

Unless you are a scientist yourself or have learned how to read and interpret scientific studies, you most likely obtain your scientific knowledge from the media. But which media? How smart are the story writers and what is their agenda?

Commercial media outlets and news reporters are primarily concerned with getting you to buy a paper or journal or to click on a link. Headlines have to be enticing enough to draw you in. This isn't to say that a news story can't be accurate, but it's often worth digging a little deeper, especially when the story claims something significant has been discovered or invented.

A recent example is an article with the headline "Dogs Prefer Praise to Food: According To Science". That's quite a statement. I suppose a more accurate headline such as "12 dogs show equal or higher preference for seeing owners and receiving praise than for receiving a piece of food in a laboratory study"

simply wouldn't have the same ring to it.

The danger with careless reporting is that the information presented is misleading or plain incorrect. If the author refers to a scientific study, you may be even more inclined to believe what is being reported. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that the study is being interpreted correctly and even the scientist may occasionally chose unfortunate wording in order to give more meaning to their findings than there actually is.

Studies into the emotional and cognitive capabilities of our dogs can be hugely valuable but only after lots more research has been conducted and by being very clear about the practical applications. A study that investigates how much value a dog



places on human social contact can help us chose the most suitable dogs for certain tasks, such as assistance dogs, in the future. As far as motivation in dog training goes however, this is highly variable and depends not just on the individual but also changes with time and context. Just like us, our dogs like good food more when they are a little hungry but may prefer a cuddle if they haven't seen their humans for a while. Follow the links below to read more about the study in question.

[www.crosspaws.com.au/blog/dog-training/dogs-love-food/](http://www.crosspaws.com.au/blog/dog-training/dogs-love-food/)  
[www.companionanimalpsychology.com/2016/08/brain-scans-show-your-dog-loves-you-and.html](http://www.companionanimalpsychology.com/2016/08/brain-scans-show-your-dog-loves-you-and.html)

Are you worried or frustrated about your dog's behaviour?  
Book a comprehensive behaviour consultation now!

**Make your dog happy. Be happy.**

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A good dog is a happy dog