

Does My Dog Know the Difference Between Right and Wrong?

There are many myths about dogs but I think one of the most common is that dogs know when they have done something “wrong” and show guilt when they are confronted about a misdeed that happened in the past.



By Kelley Bollen

Believe it or not, dogs don’t learn the concept of “right and wrong.” Humans can absolutely learn and understand when they have done something wrong because humans have a moral code of conduct. Our morals dictate how we behave in certain situations. Our morals are what prevent us from stealing from stores or punching someone in the face during an argument. We know these things are wrong based on our learned moral code.

Dogs, however, do not have morals so they really can’t understand or learn that a behavior is wrong. What dogs learn is a bit simpler – they learn whether their behavior is “safe” to perform or “unsafe.” A dog can learn that it is safe to get on the couch when no one is home, but unsafe when someone is there and yells at him to get off. A dog can learn it is safe to rummage in the garbage when alone but unsafe when you are home to get upset at her for doing so.

You also want to keep in mind that dogs repeat behaviors that are rewarding. When a dog gets on the couch, the reward is a soft comfy resting place. When a dog gets into the trash, the reward is the yummy food bits that she finds to eat. If a behavior is rewarding to the dog, the dog will do that behavior again.

Punishing a dog after the fact doesn’t work. If you don’t punish your dog while she is doing the unacceptable or undesirable behavior, she will not connect that punishment with the behavior. In order to teach your dog that the behavior is “unsafe,” you must catch her in the act. If you come home from work and discover that your dog has done something naughty (gotten into the trash, tore up a pillow, etc.) punishing her then, hours after she actually did it, will teach her only that you are unpredictably unpleasant – sometimes when you come home you are nice and sometimes you yell.

The other element that confuses us about dog behavior is the concept of guilt. Simply put – dogs are incapable of feeling the emotion of guilt. Guilt is an emotion that humans experience that is tied to our morals. We feel guilty when we know we have done something wrong. People think that their dog is showing guilt when they see her lower her head or body, pull her ears back, tuck her tail and look away with squinty eyes while you are punishing her. But actually these are postures that dogs exhibit when they are anxious or scared. Essentially your dog is unsure of why you are yelling and a bit frightened by your behavior.

It is sometimes hard for humans to understand dog behavior because we often interpret things in human terms. But dogs behave, learn and respond like dogs, not like people. Dogs are wonderful



companions who love us unconditionally and the more we learn about and understand their behavior, the richer that relationship will be.

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