

Consistency and Clarity Counts in Dog Training

By Sandra Kruczek

I had asked some visiting nieces to tell me about their dog Buddy. They all agreed that they loved him very much but that he was stubborn and not too smart. They said he didn't respond very quickly to a couple of cues, namely "come here" and "sit". It occurred to me to conduct a little demonstration with them that might shed some light on their perception. Here's what I did.

I asked each niece, individually to show me *precisely* how they cued their dog, Buddy to "come here" then "sit", both verbally and with body language. I asked their mom to do the same. They were quite enthusiastic about being the one to have it right. I could see that their understanding was more about what they conveyed as individuals rather than about what Buddy understood.

Here's what happened. Each child and mom used entirely different verbal cues including words, tone of voice, volume and repetition of the cue. Some said, "Buddy, over here", some just said, "come!" Some just made kissing sounds. Each person used entirely different hand and body gestures. Sometimes a single gesture such as pointing their finger at Buddy meant "come here" and "sit". Finger snapping was high on the list of cues. This meant anything from "come here" to "pay attention".

In the end, after some embarrassed giggling, they saw what might have been a problem. Rather than Buddy being stubborn or stupid, I explained that I thought he was actually a rather smart dog. He had effectively learned to respond to these two cues, by sorting out the intention of four different people using entirely different signals. More confusing were the different consequences he received from each person. Sometimes he was petted. Sometimes he was ignored. Sometimes he was yelled at for being slow. Yikes, poor Buddy.

We had a family discussion and they came together agreeing on a single set of verbal and body language cues for Buddy. Also, they all decided that indeed it would be clearer to Buddy if he was consistently reinforced with a little treat when he got it right. Actually, he had it right all along. The family also decided that they could be better at agreeing on a plan before teaching Buddy some tricks.

In my mind Buddy, the smart dog, had in essence learned to speak English, French, Spanish and German with all of the accompanying cultural body language. And, what a sweet disposition he has. He just figured it out and did his best. I wondered if I could do the same under those circumstances.

Good boy, Buddy.

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