

You Can Teach an Old Dog New Tricks

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Over the past few summers, I worked as a personal landscaper for a person with a multimillion dollar property and three dogs, each nearly 15 years old. When they were pups the owner had taught them to eliminate outside but since then nothing else. So, I decided to teach them a new trick.

I was responsible for the dogs all day. Often, I would be outside working and between various tasks I would coax the dogs outside by walking to them, petting them for a minute, and then walking outside. Usually, they would follow. If not I would grab them by the collars, guide them outside, and give each a treat.

This occurred a few times each week with slight variations. For example, I would walk in and wait for them to approach me. Their approaching was probably due to previous reinforcement: petting and providing treats. Gradually, I stopped providing treats for just approaching and only provided treats if they also followed me for short intervals. I slowly lengthened these intervals and the dogs were following me out the door. Immediately after the dogs exited, I gave them a reinforcer and I discontinued reinforcing for following me. I was very happy to see their progress. Eventually, when I poked my head in the door they would come outside. So, you can teach an old dog new tricks! In fact you can train three old dogs to do a new trick!

When I tried to bring this behavior under the control of a command, I encountered problems. I used the word “come” with the sight of me to get them outside. I reinforced their approaching me when I was standing in the door and saying ‘come’ and later when I said “come” but was out of sight. But this

approach failed multiple times and so I stopped to evaluate. To start, I retested entering and having them follow me to determine if the response still occurred. It did! During this analysis I realized a possible cause for their not approaching me when I called "come" but was out of view.

During the analysis, I opened the door and looked inside. One of the dogs was lying beside the door. I said his name, but he didn't move. He was deaf! So, I modified the training. Once again, I stood in sight of the dogs but this time I yelled "come." This seemed to be working, so I moved out of sight and yelled, "come." The increased volume caused two to come but I believe the other dog was too deaf to actually hear the command. Additionally, the two dogs could have responded to some noise and didn't discriminate between sounds.

Eventually, I quit yelling the command. It seems you can teach an old dog a new trick, as long as the dog can perceive it. For example, don't teach a dog with hand gestures if the dog's sight is bad. In my case, don't use a verbal command if the dog is going deaf.

Towards the middle of summer the dogs were coming outside with me as I opened the door. So, they received more exercise and their health improved. While doing this my training behaviors were reinforced by each successive step. So, I'm now more likely to train dogs!