Handling Frustration: Misunderstandings Can Lead to Displacement Behaviors



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Preventing Displacement & Avoiding the Cycle of Failure

When you would like your dog to pay attention and your dog is "ignoring" you sniffing, don't allow frustration to get the best of you. What may be happening is your dog may simply be stressed. Sniffing is a very common displacement behavior that is actually valuable data telling you your dog is stressed. Nothing is actually wrong with this sniffing, it is just an issue that needs to be addressed and ideally prevented.

Other common displacement behaviors can be:

- Running off
- Glazing over
- Freezing
- Tongue flicking
- Avoiding eye contact
- Avoiding you
- Jumping on you (appeasement)
- Licking you (appeasement)

If this list seems confusing because it includes behaviors that seem the opposite, that is because reading dog body language is complex. That is why it is called language. Just like any other language you don't just learn it in a few minutes or hours. Years of study help you master dog body language and for you to become fluent. That is why professional trainers who are committed to coercion free training are valuable.

Reading Your Dog's Body Language

Dogs communicate with their whole bodies! Understanding their signals can help prevent misunderstandings and build a trusting relationship. Here are key signs to watch for:

Relaxed & Happy – Loose body, wagging tail with a soft spine (mid-height, full wag), soft eyes, play bows. Your dog is comfortable and engaged!

Stressed or Anxious – Lip licking, yawning, turning head away, whale eye (showing whites of the eyes), tucked tail. Time to give them space and reduce stress.

Fearful or Defensive – Crouching, ears pinned back, tail tucked, growling, or showing teeth. This is a warning—help your dog feel safe before proceeding.

Appeasing - in humans you would call these sucking up behaviors and some people confuse appeasing with affection. Appeasing is not affectionate; it comes from fear and stress. Appeasing dogs may lick a person repeatedly or jump on the person. The behaviors can resemble what people may call apologies.



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How Verbal and Physical Corrections Create Stress & Displacement Behaviors

Training with prong, choke, or shock collars may seem effective in the moment, because they can stop behavior. But stopping behavior does not teach the dog what they need to do instead. Stopping behavior does not build skills. Stopping behavior is an illusion that at best creates stress and at worst leads to displacement behaviors—actions dogs do when they feel conflicted or anxious. These behaviors, again, can include:

Jumping on people – A dog seeking reassurance but misunderstood as "bad behavior."

Ignoring cues – Stress interferes with learning, making dogs appear "stubborn."

Barking or lunging – A dog feeling trapped or uncomfortable but trying to communicate.

When pet parents don't recognize these stress signals, frustration builds, leading them to increase corrections—shouting, leash yanking, or even hitting. Unfortunately, this only adds more stress, causing more displacement behaviors. This cycle of punishment and confusion can leads to learned helplessness, fear, and even aggression.

The Cycle of Failure Consists of:

Parent corrects problem behavior -> dog displays displacement behavior -> this frustrates parent who then corrects again -> dog displays more displacement behaviors -> parent is more frustrated and corrects again.

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Break the Cycle of Failure—Say No to Corrections!

Set your dog up for success by:
Use food, toys, and play to motivate and reward desired behaviors.

Training *before* any undesired behavior happens.
Reinforce cues in low-stress environments before increasing difficulty.

Use higher value treats for more stressful environments.

Watch for signs of stress and adjust training to keep sessions positive.
Focus on teaching instead of correcting—dogs thrive on guidance, not fear!

Keep your voice soft and light or even only use hand signals.

Please note that while forceful training always causes some displacement behaviors some dogs that have never experienced forceful training can still struggle with displacement behaviors. Rescues may have unpleasant histories but even dogs with perfect backgrounds can be "soft". Keeping training fun and playful is just ideal training for all dogs. Some dogs with ideal histories just can't handle failing so for those dogs building resilience is key. Build resilience by keeping all training fun and using reset cookies and play. Reset cookies are rewards that happen simply for returning to a new starting point. It is a way of saying "thank you for playing with me" to your dog and keeps them motivated and engaged.

By choosing positive reinforcement, you create a trusting, happy bond with your dog and avoid the trap of the frustrating cycle of failure. Let us commit to happy training so it is fun for both of you—because a happy dog is a well-behaved dog!

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If you need help with your dog, we are here for you, just let us know LoveDogs@CourteousCanine.com!

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