

Canine Temperament

Part IX

I expect most readers will have heard from dog owners that whilst they are training their dogs in quiet surroundings, they will obey every command instantly, but when distractions occur, responses to training are hopeless and non-existent.

Dogs are naturally distracted by all sorts of things – mainly by things seen especially if they move, or by things they smell, but not quite so much by noises heard. I have decided for simplicity to cover this subject in two parts, namely, general distraction, which includes scent distraction, and animal distraction.

General Distraction

When puppies enter their new home, at approximately nine weeks of age, the first adjustment in their lives takes place. After a few days they should be taken out for short initial walks. For each of them it is a bright new world with so many things to explore. Because their focal distance is limited, puppies will only notice things within a short distance. As the weeks go by their focal distance increases and consequently they become more aware of things around them. Some things intrigue them; others may startle or disturb them. Whatever they encounter handlers should introduce and support them with a reassuring voice. Interestingly, an aircraft flying across the sky several kilometres away would be the furthest thing a dog, with fully developed eyesight, could see.

As I have said before, dogs should be taken out for walks daily so that they become fully conditioned to everything they see, hear and smell. Dogs which are not walked as youngsters are likely to show all sorts of bad traits, from being afraid of things to being highly distracted towards them. Thus, training them to heel, sit, stay and come, plus many other exercises, becomes far more difficult.

When you are training your dog in basic heelwork, you can expect it to be distracted towards things, especially to various smells on the ground. These scent distractions must be corrected immediately and consistently. A firm but quiet word, "Leave it", should be given as your dog diverts to have a crafty sniff at something. This should be followed immediately with an appropriate jerk on the leash and as soon as your dog responds favourably by heeling properly, sincere vocal praise should be given. So you have to glue your eyes on your dog, be quick to correct and quick to praise. Later, you should be able to control your dog with voice alone, physical corrections should diminish.

When I walk a dog freely on the full length of the leash, anywhere around me, I do not mind if it occasionally sniffs the ground as we walk along, but I will not allow it to stop and detain me while it has a good sniffing session. If I did wait there, the dog would have won and do it again and again. So I keep on the move all the time and whenever it attempts to stop and sniff, I would say, "This way", give a little jerk to go on and quickly praise it on a good response. Never allow your dog to be scent distracted whilst it is performing obedience exercises. Dogs soon learn the difference between being on duty when doing obedience exercises, and being off duty when free walking. As soon as the dog is given the dismissal command, "Go free.", or "Off

you go and play" it will know that the training is over, for the time being at any rate, and it returns to free walking again.

One of the most common errors seen in heelwork is when the handler has sat his or her dog, and then allows it to turn its head around to look at something. This distraction should be corrected immediately by saying, "Leave it", give a short horizontal leash jerk with the right hand, and, as soon as the dog looks to the front, praise vocally, "Good dog", and give gentle, slow strokes on the side of its face with the left hand. Once again, be quick to correct and quick to praise. You can only do that if you have your eyes on your dog. Sadly, I hear of more and more instructors telling their handlers to look straight ahead and not to look at their dogs. That is ridiculous. Handlers are not training the trees in the distance; they are training their dogs. I often have a little chuckle to myself when I see an owner take the family dog for a walk on the leash. The dog stops and enjoys having a long sniffing session on a tree. The owner stops and waits. The dog still continues to sniff the tree. After a while I hear the owner say, "Come on. Hurry up. Are you going to be there all day?" After some time, the dog moves on and the owner says, "I don't know. All you want to do is sniff, sniff, and sniff all day long." Quite clearly, anyone can see that the dog has been allowed to have so much of its own way for a very long time. Need I say more, except to say that the owner definitely needs training.

Animal Distraction

The main cause of animal distraction is due to the lack of animal socialisation of dogs at a very early age. During those early weeks and months of puppy hood, it is vitally important to introduce your puppy with patience and care not only amongst other dogs, but with other animals as well, particularly cats, birds and, if possible, farm animals. If dogs are not socialised well at an early age, from then on owners can expect to have difficulties with animal distraction.

Even when dogs have been socialised well, they can still be distracted especially to other dogs, in that their distraction is linked with wanting to play with them. Once again, this is where obedience training is given to get the respect from each dog for its handler. I explained how this can be achieved in a previous article under the heading: Counter Marching (Basic Training- Part XX June 2008). That should only be introduced when the instructor is sure that the handlers are experienced enough to carry out this exercise where two teams walk through each other. Prior to that a handler should try to walk his or her dog past a dog which is behind some "see through" gates. Having made the necessary correction for dog distraction, the dog should then be returned past the dog behind the gates. This can be done a few times until the dog being trained will totally ignore the other dog, respect its handler and pay attention to the work it is doing. My former colleagues in the guide dog organizations and I practised this a lot when we had dog distraction problems. But I must add here that it was not just a case of making corrections. In the next stage we also used prevention by warning our dogs in a low tone, "Leave it. Straight on. Leave it." as we were about to pass a dog behind a gate through which it could see. As soon as it passed successfully, it was praised. In subsequent walks no warning was given, but when it passed with out incident the dog was praised. So wherever possible, prevention is better than correction. You should aim for that first. It saves a lot of hard work. Only use correction where and when necessary. They, like others, are simple basic principles in dog training. And remember, don't use any

food rewards. Always use sincere praise. Occasionally, we had trouble with some dogs that were food distracted. Therefore, the same principle in training was applied. By placing a piece of food on the footpath the dog was trained to walk right over it without even sniffing it, yet alone pick it up and eat it.

Several years ago a group of obedience enthusiasts and I viewed a few videos on dog training from overseas. General discussion followed and I was asked for my opinion. I said that whilst the dogs responded extremely well to the trainer throughout his demonstration, apart from the person operating the camera there was no one else in the dog training hall. The question that needs to be asked is: Would those dogs have worked so well outside in a park where there would have been various distractions? I had my doubts. If the trainer really wanted to show off his skills, surely he would have worked his dogs amongst distractions. Therefore, I was not impressed. Cheers for now.

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