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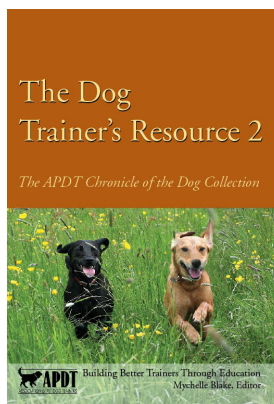
### **The Environmental Cue: A Valuable In-Home Training Tool**

By Nicole Wilde

The cue for a dog to perform a desired behavior normally comes directly from a person, in the form of a verbal request, a hand signal, or both. An “environmental cue” comes from something in the environment. For example, the ring of a doorbell is the cue for a dog to go lay on his bed. Of course, dogs are not born knowing that a doorbell is a signal to go to bed—in fact, most seem to believe it is a cue to run to the door, then jump and bark like a maniac! Dogs must be taught to understand what a specific environmental cue means and exactly how to respond.

It is simple enough to teach an environmental cue, but first the dog must understand and reliably perform the desired behavior. In the doorbell example, the dog would first have to understand and reliably perform the behavior “go to bed”—consisting of going to the bed, lying down, and staying until released—when requested. Assuming the owner normally used a verbal cue to elicit the behavior, the sound of the doorbell would be introduced, followed by the owner’s cue. Once the doorbell-verbal cue pattern had been repeated enough times, the dog would hear the doorbell, anticipate the verbal cue, and go to bed at the sound of the doorbell alone. (An alternative cue would be the owner reaching for the doorknob; this can be useful to keep dogs from door-darting not only when guests arrive, but when a family member exits.)

Why use environmental cues? For one thing, they can be extremely useful for solving behavior issues, and can be used in creative ways. And when your client sees their dog respond to an environmental cue alone, they will think you are brilliant! They will also see that the dog is capable of much more than they believed possible. Also, when a client is training something that is perceived as fun and interesting, their attitude is likely to be light and happy. Light and happy equals motivation to practice.



Let’s focus on the value of environmental cues in solving behavior issues, especially those in the home environment. This is where our clients complain about things like the dog being a pest at dinnertime, demanding attention from visitors, and a host of other behaviors that fall under the umbrella of “house manners.” If an owner’s only response to an unwanted behavior is to ineffectively reprimand the dog, the result is likely to be a lot of back-and-forth, non-productive communication that can escalate into far bigger problems. For example, the dog jumps and mouths the owner; the owner says, “No!” and pushes the dog down. In many cases, the dog will simply jump up again (and we all know what a great game that is for dogs), perhaps with greater enthusiasm, and the pattern continues. In some cases, this scenario can boil over into aggression. At the very least, it doesn’t solve the problem.

Another problem with simply reprimanding a dog for an unwanted behavior is that the dog still learns that the behavior can be successful in specific contexts. For example, in the pestering-during-dinner scenario, the dog might learn to try it only when the five-year-old son is present, because it sometimes results in food being slipped to her. Or a dog might learn that if he persists long enough, mom will reprimand a time or two and then give in.

Teaching a dog an alternate behavior is always a good solution, and environmental cues take the concept a step further. In the dinnertime scenario, the dog could be taught to go to his bed and lie down during meals. Pick a cue such as someone sitting down at the table. (An alternate cue would be the pulling out of a chair.) Assuming the dog already knows go to bed, have the person sit down and then send the dog to bed. Work toward the dog going to the bed as soon as the person sits. Have the family practice reinforcing the dog for remaining on the bed during the meal by tossing treats and praising, generously at first and then more

sporadically. The eventual outcome could be that the dog is given one treat after the family has finished the meal; or that the treats are eventually phased out completely and the dog learns to go to bed and relax during the family's mealtimes.

The use of environmental cues is limited only by your own creativity. I have used the opening of the dishwasher door as a cue for my dogs to go lie down—otherwise, Mojo is the pre-wash cycle. I had a client recently whose Jack Russell Terrier was certain that mom picking up the phone was his cue to find the nearest forbidden object and run around the house with it. Predictably, mom would pay attention to him. So we taught him instead that a phone being picked up was his cue to lie down and stay. I used the same cue with a family whose sixteen-year-old daughter chatted on the phone a lot (imagine that!) and whose Beagle mix would start barking each time the daughter picked up the phone. Since the dog wouldn't bark while in a down, the down-stay neatly solved the problem.

A trainer friend likes to use the cue of anything being placed on the kitchen counter as a cue to go lie down and stay by the kitchen door. Before my German Shepherd Soko passed in April, she and Mojo both knew that whenever I opened a treat roll to slice it up, that was their cue to lie down and stay. In fact, they got to the point that they would lie down as soon as the cutting board came out, which preceded the appearance of the roll—that was thanks to my being domestically challenged, and the cutting board never being used for anything else. Of course, they would get slices tossed to them periodically.

Lying down and staying is a convenient behavior to pair with environmental cues, but it is certainly not the only one. Dogs can be taught that when in the yard, a person approaching the sliding glass door from inside is a cue to sit and wait to be invited in. Sitting and waiting can also be the desired response to the cue of the dog's meal being prepared. Teaching a dog that the doorbell is her cue to go find and carry her toy (e.g., a Kong) is a great way to approach the problem of a dog who barks when visitors arrive. Tricks can be incorporated as well; the dog who sits and waves at arriving visitors is not only adorable, but is also not barking or jumping on them.

The more tools in a trainer's "toolbox" the better. So in addition to solving in-home issues in the

usual ways, consider creative ways to incorporate environmental cues as well.

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