

Teacher's Pet – How To Make Sure Your Training Doesn't Go In One Ear And Out The Other

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Have you ever parked outside a restaurant or concert, had an exciting few hours, and then walked outside to realize you have no idea where you left your car? Why can we easily recall our childhood street address but forget something we knew just a short time earlier?

Just like us, dogs have short-term and long-term memory. Short-term memory helps us remember where we parked, or where to go next on an agility course. It helps your dog remember where he put the bully stick he was enjoying before he had to leap up and bark at the door when the doorbell rang.

When we train our dogs, we want what they learn to persist much longer than a few hours. To accomplish this, those lessons need to be placed in long-term memory. Numerous studies have shown that reward-based training is the most effective way for dogs to learn. Dogs trained with positive reinforcement and without aversives are less stressed, which permits optimal learning. (Have you ever tried to memorize some facts with your boss or teacher staring at you as opposed to in the comfortable solace of your bedroom?) However, training methods aside, a recent study examined what kinds of post-training activities will help your dog send those newly learned lessons into long term storage.

The Study Design

Researchers in Hungary undertook a relatively simple, but fascinating study ([references in blog](#)). The figure below outlines the study design. They took 53 dogs of a variety of breeds and mixed breeds that knew how to “sit” and “down” in response to cues spoken in Hungarian. They then had their people train them the sit and down using cues in English. The dogs were tested to be sure they had learned the new cues and were then divided into 4 groups of 12 to 14 dogs each.

One group spent the hour after training sleeping in the owner's car in the parking lot. A second group was taken for a 1-hour relaxed on-leash walk through a college campus. Dogs in a third group were taught additional new English commands in 10-min sessions, and dogs in a fourth group played with a Kong® toy while lying on the floor. The dogs were retested for their ability to correctly respond to the English sit and down cues immediately (short-term memory) and one week later (long-term memory).

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The Results

Dogs that spent the hour after learning sleeping, walking, or learning new commands, all retained their ability to respond to the English sit and down commands in the short term. The dogs that played with the Kong® toy were not as effective in responding to the new cues. The experimenters' interpretation was that because the playing had caused more arousal, dogs were less focused during the retesting session.

A week later, the dogs were retested on their responses to the English cues. Interestingly, dogs that that slept, walked or played after learning had significantly better performance on the long-term memory test. In contrast, the performance of the dogs that spent time with additional training after the initial training period did not improve at all.

The Take-Home Message

The results of this study suggested that when dogs experience a different activity after a training session, whether that involves physical activity or sleep, their retention improves in the long term. They also suggest that an overly long or complex teaching session may interfere with consolidation of learned materials into long-term memory.

This study confirms what the best trainers have long observed and known intuitively; that training sessions should be kept relatively short and focused – no more than 20 minutes to work on one or two concepts is best.

The study also confirms that consolidation of new knowledge will occur under a variety of circumstances and that dogs don't necessarily have to be crated or rested after a training session, as some have proposed.

So go train your dog for a few minutes and then take walk, play a game of fetch, or spend some couch-time together watching television. You can even drive to your favorite park and go for a good-for-the-soul hike together. Just don't forget where you parked your car!

For blog references and photos, please go to www.AvidogZink.com/blog.



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