



Don't Say "No"...?



Positive trainers seek to fill the void

© Stacy Braslau-Schneck, CPDT

I recently read that clicker trainers tell people not to say "No" to their dogs, and I wondered where that idea came from. We certainly advocate concentrating on what the dog is doing right, and rewarding that. If you're teaching heeling, for example, you would click-and-treat when the dog was in the correct position rather than leash-popping or scolding all the times when the dog wasn't. But few people are really inclined to say "No" to train *new* behaviors — it usually comes out when we're trying to stop unwanted *old* behaviors.

Prevent Old Habits

So how do you stop old behaviors you don't like? Management is always your first step — do what you can to prevent your dog from practicing the bad habit. For example, keep him inside when you're not around to prevent digging in the yard, stand on the middle of his leash to prevent jumping on guests, etc. (see the [Quick Tricks Training Tip](#) for more information).

Create New Habits

The second step is, figure out a different action your dog can do instead, one that is "incompatible" or will prevent the bad habit because the dog can't do the new, nice behavior and the old, bad behavior at the same time. He'll have to make a choice. As you practice the new behavior, reward it generously with praise, toys, attention, food, and a variety of other rewards, so that it becomes something your dog is eager to do.

Then, when you allow him to make a choice between the old behavior and the new, he's more likely to choose the new (if your rewards have outweighed his old habit) when you let up on the management (in other words, when you give him the opportunity to choose one or the other). If he chooses right, you reward him generously (with a "jackpot" reward).

What if he chooses "wrong", and does the old, bad behavior you want to get rid of? First, it's a sign that you need to practice the new behavior more (be sure to practice in a situation similar to the real one — it's not enough to practice "sit" as alternative to jumping on your guests, you need to practice it *at the front door*).

Stop it in its tracks

But what do you do right then, as the dog is jumping up on your test guest? You want to interrupt the dog, stop the behavior while it's happening. A short, sharp low sound is great for interrupting behavior and getting the dog's attention. "No!" fits the bill nicely (so does "Eh-eh!", "Stop!", or even "Woof!").

When you interrupt the dog, you've created a behavioral vacuum (as [Jean Donaldson](#) says), and you're going to need to fill it. Here's your opportunity to cue the new behavior and reward it. This is the true meaning "correction" — teaching the correct response. So you say, "No!" and then immediately "sit!", and then, hopefully, "Good dog, you did it!". (If the dog doesn't respond to the command right away, make it happen — use a lure, move the dog away from the distraction, gently guide him into position, whatever it takes!)

Be Clear

One reason that trainers avoid telling people to say "No!" is that "No!" is ambiguous — it doesn't clarify what the dog is doing wrong. If you say "No!" to a dog who is jumping on your guest, your dog might think it was the friendly greeting you don't like (the dog might think, "What, I should be barking and threatening this person?") or something else about the performance. Even if you say something like "No jump!", have you really taught the dog what "jump" means? Have you taught a "Jump!" command so he knows the contrast? Even with human children (who have generally been demonstrated to eventually understand English, unlike dogs) we may say "No!" but follow it up with "Don't stick your fingers in that electrical socket!" or " Stop hitting the dog!" so that we can clarify what is wrong. Better still is when we tell kids what they should do instead — "leave that alone; here, come play with your toys" and "Pet the dog gently, see he like it under his chin!". We stop the bad behavior quickly with a sharp sound and then quickly redirect it into a better action.

Same thing with dogs. Go ahead and say "No!" when, in spite of your prevention efforts, your dog engages in an annoying or dangerous action. Stop that action in the moment! Then be sure to follow up that stop with an informative, familiar command like "sit", "come" or "leave it". "No!" by itself will put an immediate stop to the behavior — but only a temporary one. If you don't replace the undesired behavior with another one, you'll have no long-term improvement. So don't *just* say "No!". You'll just have to keep repeating "No!" every time the situation occurs. And that's what we don't want!

The focus becomes put on the action that you want, rather than the action you don't want.

And "No!", instead of a frustrated mantra, becomes a quick tool for interruption so you can go back to working on that behavior that you want.

This article is copyrighted to Stacy Braslau-Schneck. Would you, your training company, or your club like to reprint this?

Please be sure to keep my name, business name, and the website URL with the article, and if possible, please send me a copy. See the [Contact](#) page for email and mailing address.

Links

Two articles from the [ClickerSolutions website](#): [Stopping Negative Behavior Positively](#) and [Training an Alternative Behavior](#).

[[Home](#)] [[Classes](#)] [[Training Tips](#)] [[Resources](#)] [[Events](#)]

Copyright 2004 Stacy's Wag'N'Train