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30 Railroad Ave • Albany, NY 12205  
[info@alldawgstraining.com](mailto:info@alldawgstraining.com) • [www.alldawgstraining.com](http://www.alldawgstraining.com)  
(518)831-9192 • Fax (518)831-9091

### **Don't Shoot a Fly with a Bazooka But Under-Correcting is Just as Dangerous!**

By Diane Blackman, CPDT-KA, IACP PDTI/CDTA, CTDI

We all love to positively reward our dogs when they do something right. However, dogs are not perfect and they will make some mistakes. A correction, when warranted, can give valuable information to your dog.

#### **When do I give a correction?**

Typically, never give a correction during a learning phase. How would you feel if somebody asked you what the square root of pi is, and when you answered incorrectly, slapped you across the face? Instead, set the dog up for success. You can do that by:

1. Make sure you can get the behavior before you name the behavior. Teaching a dog to respond on the first command can reduce the need for corrections later down the road.
2. Make sure the dog truly understands what a command means before weaning off the reward. Too many people want their dog to do things without treats. Instead, we should be concentrating on getting the dog to do it right first!
3. Make sure the dog understands the command in multiple locations. Dogs do not generalize commands well. This means just because your dog can perform a command in your living room does not mean he understands the concept in the park!

Once a dog truly understands a command in multiple places, it is time to wean off the rewards. Do not simply go from rewarding 100% of the time to 0% of the time. Instead, randomize when a dog receives a reward – and you can always praise the dog for doing it right! Start with giving treats more often and slowly reward less and less.

#### **Giving a Correction**

Once you do your work as your dog's trainer and set the dog up for success, when he fails to respond, you give a correction to provide feedback that not complying with a command is NOT an option. However, you must provide the feedback in a way the dog understands, and while every dog is an individual, dogs fall into four basic correction categories:

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1. **Classically Hard**

These dogs are typically more tolerant of physical and/or verbal corrections. That means you may need to use a stronger correction to offend the dog enough to stop the behavior.

2. **Classically Soft**

These dogs are typically very intolerant of physical and/or verbal corrections. A little goes a long way with these types of dogs.

3. **Masquerading Soft**

These dogs act like classically soft dogs – but do not respond to soft corrections – and their behavior does not change after repeated soft corrections.

4. **Masquerading Hard**

These are the toughest dogs to correct. They act like classically hard dogs but are very easily over-corrected. These dogs are big softies at heart!

If you correct your dog more than about one-half dozen times and the dog's behavior does not change, it is time to increase the value of the correction. If you slowly increase your correction, your dog will habituate quickly and each correction level will become meaningless over time. Instead, jump several levels each time you correct your dog until your dog's behavior changes.

**How Do You Know If You Over (or Under-Corrected) Your Dog?**

- **Under Correcting** – Your dog learns you are not serious about getting him to comply. You may lose your dog's respect, and once lost, it can be hard to regain! You are simply nagging your dog!
- **Over Correcting** – You can break the trust your dog has in you and ruin the relationship you worked so hard to build with your canine companion. Your dog may become fearful of you approaching him.
- **Just Right** – The behavior corrected stops quickly and the dog is respectful but not fearful of you.

If you are unsure what type of correction to use with your dog, sign up for a class or private lessons, and allow our experienced instructors help you safely and effectively communicate with your dog.

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