

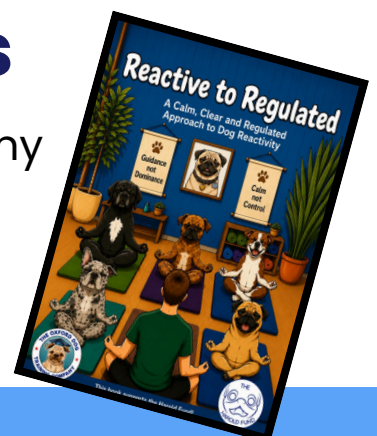
THE CALM DOG BLUEPRINT

7 Principles That Influence Behaviour More Than Most Owners Realise



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Introduction

Thank you for downloading this guide.

If you're reading these pages, there's a good chance that you care deeply about your dog. Perhaps you're dealing with a specific behavioural problem. Perhaps you're trying to understand your dog a little better before problems arise. Or perhaps, like many owners I meet every week, you've simply discovered that owning a dog is far more complicated than you expected.

Whatever brought you here, I hope this guide gives you something valuable.

Over the last decade, I have had the privilege of working with well over a thousand dogs. During that time, I have met dogs of every breed, age and temperament imaginable. Some have been anxious, some reactive, some frustrated, some aggressive, while others simply struggled to cope with the modern world we ask them to live in. I've also worked with countless owners who wanted exactly the same thing: a happier dog and a calmer life together.

One of the things that has fascinated me throughout that journey is how often behaviour is misunderstood.

When most people look at a dog, they naturally focus on what the dog is doing. They see barking, pulling, jumping up, lunging, growling, chasing or ignoring commands. Those behaviours become the problem to solve because they are the things that are easiest to see.

It is a perfectly understandable way of thinking.

After all, behaviour is the part that affects our daily lives. It is what embarrasses us on walks, frustrates us in the house and sometimes leaves us wondering whether we are getting something fundamentally wrong.

The longer I have worked with dogs, however, the more I have realised that behaviour is rarely the whole story.

In fact, many of the biggest improvements I have seen have not come from teaching more commands or introducing more complicated training exercises. They have come from understanding why the behaviour was happening in the first place.

That small shift in perspective changed the way I work with dogs.





Instead of asking, *"How do I stop this behaviour?"* I found myself asking a different question.

"What is causing this behaviour?"

Those two questions might sound similar, but they often lead us in completely different directions.

If we focus only on stopping behaviour, it is easy to become caught in an endless cycle of corrections, commands and management. We spend our time reacting to what the dog is doing, often without understanding what they are feeling.

When we begin to understand the reasons behind behaviour, however, something interesting happens.

Many behaviours start to make sense

- The reactive dog that appeared stubborn may actually be overwhelmed
- The dog that never settles may not need another walk, but a chance to learn how to relax
- The puppy that seems incapable of listening may simply be trying to learn how to relax

Behaviour begins to look less like disobedience and more like communication.

That does not mean every behaviour should be accepted, nor does it mean dogs do not need training. Good training is incredibly important. Dogs benefit from clear guidance, appropriate boundaries and opportunities to learn how to live successfully alongside us.

What it does mean is that good training often begins before we ask a dog to perform a single behaviour.

It begins with understanding the dog in front of us.

The purpose of this guide is not to teach dozens of training techniques or provide a step-by-step solution for every behavioural problem. Entire books have been written about those subjects, and every dog is different.

Instead, I want to share seven principles that have influenced my own thinking more than anything else.

They are not complicated. In fact, one of the reasons they are so powerful is because they are remarkably simple.





They have shaped the way I approach behaviour consultations, puppy training, reactive dogs and everyday dog ownership. More importantly, they have helped hundreds of owners stop looking at behaviour as something to fight against and start seeing it as something to understand.

My hope is that by the time you reach the end of this guide, you won't simply know a little more about dog training.

You'll look at your own dog a little differently. Because when we begin to understand why dogs behave the way they do, we often discover that many of the challenges we face become far less confusing. And that is where meaningful behaviour change really begins.

Principle 1: Behaviour Is Often a Symptom

One of the biggest changes in my thinking didn't happen because I discovered a new training technique. It happened because I started asking a different question.

Like many people who work with dogs, I initially spent most of my time looking at behaviour. Owners would contact me because their dog was barking, lunging, pulling on the lead, jumping up, chasing cars, guarding food or refusing to come back when called. Those behaviours were the reason they picked up the phone, so naturally they became the starting point for the conversation.

It seemed logical enough. If the problem is barking, we need to stop the barking. If the problem is pulling, we need to stop the pulling. If the problem is aggression, we need to stop the aggression.

For a long time, I approached behaviour in exactly the same way. Then something started to bother me.

Dogs that looked completely different on the surface often seemed to improve in remarkably similar ways.

One dog was reactive because they were frightened. Another struggled because they became frustrated. A third seemed unable to settle at home. A fourth barked constantly whenever visitors arrived. On paper, these looked like four completely different behaviour problems.





Yet when we started helping each dog feel calmer, more secure and better able to cope with their environment, something interesting often happened. The behaviour began to change.

Not always immediately, and certainly not without work, but often much more quickly than I would have expected if we had focused only on the behaviour itself.

That observation changed the way I looked at dogs.

Instead of seeing behaviour as the problem, I gradually started seeing it as information.

What Is Your Dog Trying to Tell You?

Imagine that your car's fuel warning light suddenly appears on the dashboard.

You have two options: The first is to place a piece of tape over the warning light so you can no longer see it. The second is to stop and put fuel in the tank.

Both approaches remove the warning light. Only one solves the problem. Behaviour often works in much the same way.

Barking, lunging, growling and pulling are rarely random acts. They are the dog's way of responding to the world around them. Sometimes they are expressing excitement. Sometimes frustration. Sometimes fear. Sometimes uncertainty. Sometimes they are simply telling us that they are struggling to cope.

If we focus entirely on stopping the behaviour without asking why it is happening, we risk covering the warning light rather than addressing the reason it appeared in the first place.

That doesn't mean behaviour should be ignored. Quite the opposite. Behaviour matters because it gives us valuable information. It tells us how the dog is experiencing the world.

Beyond the Surface

Think about the last time you felt stressed. Perhaps you became quieter than usual. Perhaps you were more irritable. Perhaps you struggled to concentrate or found yourself becoming impatient over things that normally wouldn't bother you.





Those behaviours weren't really the problem. They were symptoms of something happening underneath. Dogs are no different.

A dog that barks whenever somebody approaches the house may not simply be "a barker." They may be anxious about unfamiliar people entering what they consider to be a safe space.

A dog that pulls constantly on the lead may not be trying to dominate their owner. They may simply be overwhelmed by excitement, desperate to investigate the environment or lacking the skills to walk calmly.

A dog that growls when approached while eating is not necessarily trying to challenge the family. They may simply be worried that something important will be taken away.

The behaviour changes. The principle remains the same. If we only look at what the dog is doing, we often miss why they are doing it.

There Is Rarely One Simple Explanation

One of the reasons behaviours can be so difficult to understand is that the same behaviour may have several different causes.

Two dogs may both bark at other dogs: One may be frightened, the other may desperately want to play.

From a distance, the behaviour looks almost identical. The emotional state behind it is completely different.

This is why copying advice from another owner or following generic training videos online can sometimes lead to disappointment.

The behaviour may look the same. The dog may not be.

Good behaviour work is rarely about finding a technique that stops barking, lunging or pulling in every situation. It is about understanding the individual dog standing in front of you.





The Importance of Curiosity

Over the years, I have become increasingly convinced that curiosity is one of the most valuable qualities a dog owner can develop.

When behaviour becomes difficult, it is easy to move straight into problem-solving mode.

How do I stop this? How do I fix it? What command should I teach?

Those are understandable questions, but I have found another question is often even more useful: Why?

- Why did that behaviour happen?
- Why did it happen in that situation but not another
- Why today?
- Why around that dog?
- Why when that person appeared?
- Why after that event?

The answers are not always obvious, but asking the question changes the way we observe our dogs.

Instead of reacting immediately, we begin looking for patterns. Those patterns often provide the clues we need.

A Different Way of Thinking

One of the biggest lessons dogs have taught me is that behaviour rarely exists in isolation.

It is influenced by health, previous experiences, environment, learning history, genetics, emotional state and countless other factors that interact every single day. That complexity can sometimes feel overwhelming.

The good news is that you do not need to become an expert in every area of canine behaviour to become a better observer. You simply need to remember one idea: behaviour is often the visible part of a much larger picture.

When we learn to look beneath the surface instead of reacting only to what we can see, behaviour begins to make far more sense.





And when behaviour starts making sense, we are far more likely to choose solutions that create lasting change rather than simply temporary improvements.

Three Ideas to Remember

As you move through the rest of this guide, I encourage you to keep these three principles in mind.

- Behaviour is communication before it is a problem.
- The same behaviour can have very different causes.
- The most effective solutions usually begin with understanding *why* a behaviour is happening, not simply how to stop it.

Everything else we discuss builds on these ideas.

Because once we stop seeing behaviour as the problem itself and start seeing it as a clue, we begin to understand our dogs in a completely different way.

Principle 2: Emotional State Changes Everything

If Principle One was about looking beyond behaviour, then this principle is about understanding what we often find underneath it.

Over the years, I have become increasingly interested in emotional state.

Not because it is a fashionable phrase, and certainly not because I believe it explains everything, but because I kept seeing it appear in almost every behaviour case I worked with.

Whether the problem was reactivity, poor recall, separation anxiety, excessive excitement or frustration, I found myself asking the same question: *"How is this dog feeling right now?"*

At first, that question felt surprisingly simple. Surely every good trainer considers how a dog feels?

Of course they do.

But the more I observed dogs, the more I realised there is a difference between acknowledging emotional state and allowing it to shape the decisions we make





during training. That difference turned out to be much bigger than I had imagined.

We Don't Make Our Best Decisions Under Pressure

Imagine somebody asks you to solve a difficult puzzle.

If you are sitting comfortably in your own home with no distractions, you will probably take your time. You'll think clearly, weigh up the options and eventually arrive at an answer.

Now imagine somebody asks you exactly the same question while a fire alarm is sounding, people are shouting around you and you are trying to find the nearest exit.

You haven't become less intelligent. You simply have less capacity to think clearly. Your brain has shifted its priorities. Dogs experience something remarkably similar.

When a dog becomes frightened, overwhelmed, frustrated or highly excited, their ability to process information often changes dramatically. Behaviours that seemed effortless five minutes earlier may suddenly become difficult. A dog that could happily respond to a cue in the garden may appear to have forgotten everything the moment another dog appears on the horizon.

Owners often describe this as selective hearing. I think something different is usually happening. The dog hasn't forgotten. The dog is struggling to access what they already know.

Behaviour Begins Long Before We See It

One of the reasons emotional states fascinate me is that it often begins changing before behaviour does.

Take a reactive dog as an example. Owners often tell me that the reaction comes "out of nowhere."

The dog sees another dog and suddenly they are barking, lunging and pulling towards the end of the lead.





When we slow the situation down, however, we often notice the behaviour started much earlier:

- Perhaps the dog's breathing changed
- Their body became slightly stiffer
- Their ears moved forwards
- Their pace quickened
- Their attention narrowed
- Their muscles became tense

By the time the barking arrived, the dog's emotional state had already been changing for several seconds. The behaviour was simply the final part of the process.

Learning to recognise those earlier signs is one of the most valuable skills any owner can develop.

Not because it allows us to stop every problem before it happens, but because it gives us opportunities to help our dog while they are still able to think.

Every Dog Has Good Days and Difficult Days

One mistake I think many owners make is expecting their dog to behave exactly the same every day.

Humans don't. Some days we feel confident, some days tired. Some days we have endless patience, other days the smallest inconvenience feels surprisingly difficult.

Dogs are no different. Their emotional state is constantly influenced by sleep, health, previous experiences, exercise, environment, social interactions and countless other factors that we may never even notice. This is one reason behaviour can sometimes appear inconsistent.

A dog that coped well with a busy park yesterday may struggle with exactly the same walk today. That doesn't necessarily mean the training has stopped working. It may simply mean the dog is experiencing the world differently on that particular day.





Recognising this helps us become more flexible as owners. Instead of expecting identical performances every time, we begin responding to the dog standing in front of us today.

Calmness Creates Opportunity

One of the biggest lessons dogs have taught me is that calmness is not simply the absence of excitement. It is a state in which learning becomes easier:

- Communication becomes clearer
- Decision-making improves
- Recovery happens more quickly

That does not mean dogs should be calm all the time. Dogs should run, play, explore and enjoy life. Excitement is a normal part of being a healthy dog.

The important question is whether they can return from those moments. Can they recover? Can they settle? Can they switch from excitement back to relaxation?

Those transitions are often just as important as the exciting moments themselves.

Many behavioural problems become much easier to manage when dogs develop the ability to recover more quickly from challenging situations.

Changing State Before Changing Behaviour

For many years I approached behaviour by asking myself what I wanted the dog to do.

Now I often find myself asking a different question first: *"What does this dog need in order to be capable of doing it?"*

That small change has influenced almost every consultation I carry out.

- If a dog is overwhelmed, my priority is rarely to teach a new behaviour immediately
- If a dog is frightened, I am unlikely to begin by asking for perfect obedience
- If a dog is struggling to cope, I first want to help them return to a state where learning becomes possible again





Only then do I begin asking more of them. Ironically, this often makes training feel much easier.

Not because we are lowering our expectations, but because we are choosing better moments to teach.

Looking At Your Own Dog

Over the next few days, try a simple experiment.

Instead of focusing only on what your dog is doing, spend a little time observing how they move through different situations:

- When do they appear relaxed?
- When do they become more alert?
- How quickly do they recover after excitement?
- How easily do they settle once they return home?
- Do they cope equally well in every environment, or do certain situations seem much more difficult than others?

You don't need to analyse every detail.

Simply becoming more aware of your dog's emotional state will often change the way you interpret their behaviour.

Many owners tell me this is one of the most valuable shifts they make.

Not because it solves every problem overnight, but because it replaces frustration with understanding.

Three Ideas to Remember

As you continue reading, keep these three ideas in mind.

- Emotional state influences what your dog is capable of learning.
- Behaviour often changes because emotional state changes first.
- Helping your dog feel calmer is not the end goal, but it often creates the conditions in which learning, confidence and good decision-making become possible.





Once we begin paying attention to emotional state, many behaviours that once seemed confusing begin to make much more sense.

And when behaviour starts making sense, we are far better placed to help our dogs navigate the world with confidence.

Principle 3: Calmness Is A Skill

When owners describe their dogs, one of the words I hear most often is *calm*.

Sometimes it is used as a compliment: *"He's such a calm dog."*

Other times it is used as a goal: *"I just wish she could learn to calm down."*

What has fascinated me over the years is how often calmness is treated as though it is something a dog either has or does not have, almost like the colour of their coat or the shape of their ears.

Some dogs are simply calm. Others are simply excitable. End of story.

The longer I have worked with dogs, the less I believe that is true.

Certainly, genetics play an important role. Breed, temperament and individual personality all influence how a dog experiences the world. Some dogs are naturally more energetic than others, just as some people are naturally more outgoing or more cautious.

However, I have met too many dogs who have changed dramatically over time to believe that calmness is fixed.

I have watched anxious dogs learn to relax, I have watched impulsive dogs become thoughtful, and I have watched highly reactive dogs gradually develop the ability to pause, observe and make better decisions.

Those changes did not happen because the dogs became different animals. They happened because they learned different ways of responding to the world around them.

That is why I have come to think of calmness as a skill. Not the only skill a dog needs, but one of the most important.





We Often Teach Excitement Without Realising It

One of the most interesting conversations I have with owners usually begins with a simple question: *"When is your dog most excited?"*

The answers are remarkably similar:

- When the lead comes out
- When visitors arrive
- When another dog appears
- When a ball is produced
- When somebody opens the car door
- When dinner is prepared

None of these things are inherently bad. They are all enjoyable parts of many dogs' lives.

The problem is that excitement often becomes the only emotional state we consistently practise.

Think about the average day from a dog's perspective:

- Walks begin with excitement
- Meals begin with excitement
- Visitors create excitement
- Games create excitement
- Trips in the car create excitement
- Training sessions create excitement

Then, almost as an afterthought, we expect the dog to settle quietly in the house.

For many dogs, this becomes surprisingly difficult. Not because they are being naughty, but because we have unintentionally spent far more time reinforcing excitement than we have teaching recovery.

Recovery Is the Missing Skill

If there is one thing I wish more owners understood, it is that excitement itself is not the problem.

Healthy dogs should become excited. They should enjoy exploring, running, playing and interacting with the world.





The real question is not whether a dog becomes excited. The question is how easily they recover afterwards.

- Can they return to a relaxed state once the exciting event has finished?
- Can they settle after a walk?
- Can they lie down after visitors leave?
- Can they switch off after a game of fetch?

Recovery is where emotional regulation begins.

When I watch dogs during behaviour consultations, I often pay just as much attention to what happens after an event as I do during it.

Some dogs recover remarkably quickly. Others seem to carry that heightened emotional state with them for hours afterwards.

The longer recovery takes, the more difficult it often becomes for the dog to think clearly, learn effectively and make good decisions. Helping dogs recover more efficiently is one of the most valuable things we can teach them.

Calmness Cannot Be Forced

One of the reasons owners become frustrated is because calmness appears to be something that should be achievable through instruction:

- We ask the dog to sit
- We ask them to stay
- We ask them to lie down

Then we wonder why they still seem restless.

The answer is often quite simple – a dog can perform a behaviour without feeling calm.

Most of us have experienced something similar ourselves.

Imagine sitting perfectly still before an important interview. From the outside, you appear calm. Inside, your mind may be racing. Your heart rate is elevated. Your breathing is quicker than usual. You are complying with the situation, but you are not relaxed.





Dogs can do exactly the same thing. A dog may sit beautifully while still feeling overwhelmed. They may hold a stay while remaining highly aroused. That is one reason I try not to confuse behaviour with emotional state. The two are connected, but they are not identical.

Calmness Grows Through Experience

So how do dogs become calmer? In my experience, rarely through a single exercise.

Instead, calmness develops through hundreds of small experiences that gradually teach the dog they can cope with the world around them:

- It develops when owners stop feeling the need to fill every moment with activity
- It develops when dogs learn that not every walk has to be exciting
- It develops when owners remain calm during situations that previously caused panic
- It develops when dogs are given opportunities to observe rather than constantly react

Perhaps most importantly, it develops when we recognise calm behaviour and quietly allow it to become part of everyday life.

Many owners unintentionally pay far more attention to excitement than they do to relaxation:

- The dog racing around the house receives attention
- The dog barking receives attention
- The dog demanding play receives attention

Meanwhile, the dog quietly lying on their bed often receives none at all. Yet that quiet moment may be exactly the behaviour we hope to see more often. Sometimes calmness grows simply because we learn to notice it.

Patience Is Part of The Process

One of the reasons calmness can be difficult to teach is because progress is often subtle.





Owners naturally notice dramatic moments:

- The barking that stopped
- The recall that worked
- The walk that went well

Calmness is different. It often appears in small moments that are easy to overlook:

- The dog recovers slightly more quickly after seeing another dog
- They settle five minutes sooner after a walk
- They pause before reacting instead of reacting immediately
- They look back towards their owner instead of charging forwards

These moments may seem insignificant on their own. Taken together, they often represent the beginning of meaningful change.

The dogs that impress me most are rarely the ones that learn commands the fastest. They are the dogs that gradually become better at regulating themselves. Those changes often last far longer than any individual training exercise.

Three Ideas to Remember

As you move on to the next principle, keep these three ideas in mind.

- Calmness is not simply a personality trait. It is a skill that many dogs can develop over time.
- Excitement is healthy, but recovery is just as important.
- Lasting behaviour change often begins by helping dogs become better at regulating themselves rather than simply teaching more commands.

The calmer a dog becomes, the more opportunities they have to learn, make good decisions and cope with the challenges of everyday life.

And that is why calmness is not the reward at the end of training. It is one of the foundations that makes good training possible in the first place.





Principle 4: Sometimes The Best Thing to Do Is Less

One of the hardest lessons I have learned from working with dogs is that doing more does not always produce better results.

That may sound like a strange thing for a dog behaviourist to say.

After all, people usually contact me because they want a solution. They expect training plans, exercises, techniques and strategies. They want to know what they should do next, and understandably so. When you are living with a dog whose behaviour is becoming increasingly difficult, it feels natural to assume that the answer must involve more action.

For a long time, I believed something similar:

- If a dog struggled with recall, perhaps they needed more recall training
- If they barked at other dogs, perhaps they needed more exposure
- If they became over-excited, perhaps they needed more exercise
- If they ignored their owner, perhaps they needed more commands, more repetition or more consistency

Sometimes those things were helpful. Sometimes they weren't.

The more dogs I worked with, the more I realised that owners were often trying incredibly hard. They weren't failing because they lacked commitment. In many cases, they were doing almost everything they had been told to do:

- They had attended training classes
- They watched videos
- They watched videos
- They carried treats on every walk
- They constantly redirected, rewarded, corrected and managed their dog's behaviour

Many of them were exhausted. The surprising part was that many of their dogs looked exhausted too – not physically, but mentally.

Their lives had become one long training session. Every walk involved instruction. Every interaction became a learning opportunity. Every unwanted behaviour was interrupted. Every quiet moment was quickly replaced by another game, another exercise or another attempt to improve something.





The intention was always good. The outcome was not always what the owner hoped for.

Dogs Need Time to Process

One thing I think we sometimes forget is that learning does not only happen while we are actively teaching. It also happens afterwards.

Think about learning any new skill yourself. Reading a book is only one part of learning. The ideas often become clearer after you have had time to think about them. A conversation continues in your mind long after it has ended. New information gradually connects with things you already know.

Dogs are no different. They also need time to process experiences.

They need opportunities to explore without constant interruption. They need moments to observe the world without always being asked to perform. They need time to recover after exciting or challenging situations.

Learning is not simply about input.

It is also about reflection, recovery and repetition.

When every moment becomes another lesson, we sometimes remove the very space in which learning naturally develops.

Silence Can Be Surprisingly Powerful

One exercise I occasionally suggest to owners sounds almost too simple.

On their next walk, I ask them to speak less. Not because communication is unimportant, but because many owners don't realise how often they are talking:

- "Leave it."
- "This way."
- "Good boy."
- "Come on."
- "No."
- "Watch me."
- "Sit."





- "Leave it."
- "Come on."

The words are usually well-intentioned, but after a while they begin to merge into constant background noise.

Some owners are genuinely surprised when they realise they have spoken to their dog almost continuously for an entire walk.

When they become quieter, something interesting often happens. They start observing more. They notice what their dog is looking at. They notice when their dog's pace changes. They notice moments of curiosity, uncertainty and relaxation that previously passed them by.

Ironically, speaking less often helps owners communicate more effectively. They stop asking for behaviour every few seconds and begin choosing moments that genuinely matter.

Not Every Behaviour Needs an Immediate Response

One of the biggest pressures facing modern dog owners is the feeling that every behaviour requires intervention.

A puppy picks up a leaf – redirect them.

A dog pauses to sniff – call them back.

Another dog appears – ask for eye contact.

The dog becomes excited. Before long, owners feel as though they must constantly manage every second of their dog's life.

I understand why. There is no shortage of advice encouraging owners to prevent rehearsal, seize every training opportunity and remain engaged throughout every walk.

There is value in those ideas. But there is also value in recognising when a dog simply needs to experience the world.

Not every sniff is a problem, not every pause requires instruction, and not every decision needs to be made for the dog.





Sometimes allowing a dog to observe quietly from a distance teaches far more than asking them to perform a series of commands.

Sometimes doing less creates more thoughtful dogs because it gives them opportunities to think for themselves.

Observation Before Intervention

Over the years, I have found myself becoming slower to intervene. That doesn't mean ignoring behaviour. It means observing first.

If a dog suddenly stops on a walk, my first thought is no longer, "How do I get them moving again?" Instead, I wonder what they have noticed.

If a dog hesitates before approaching something unfamiliar, I am interested in understanding what they are experiencing before deciding whether they need my help.

If a dog becomes excited, I ask myself whether they are still coping or whether they are beginning to lose the ability to regulate themselves.

Those few seconds of observation often change everything. Instead of reacting automatically, I begin responding thoughtfully.

I think owners benefit enormously from developing the same habit. Observation rarely makes behaviour worse. Rushing to intervene sometimes can.

The Difference Between Doing Less and Doing Nothing

It is important to make one thing clear. Doing less is not the same as doing nothing.

Dogs still need guidance, boundaries, training, and they still need us to help them navigate situations they cannot yet manage alone.

The difference lies in choosing our moments carefully.

Good trainers are not effective because they intervene constantly. They are effective because they know when intervention is likely to make a difference:





- Sometimes that means stepping in
- Sometimes it means waiting
- Sometimes it means giving the dog a chance to work something out for themselves

Knowing the difference is one of the skills that develops with experience.

A Question Worth Asking

The next time you are with your dog, ask yourself one simple question before you intervene: *"Does my dog need me right now, or do they simply need a little time?"*

Sometimes the answer will be obvious. Sometimes they genuinely need guidance.

Other times, however, you may discover that your dog is already beginning to solve the situation without your help. Those are often the moments when confidence grows.

Not because we taught the dog exactly what to do, but because we gave them the opportunity to discover they were capable of coping.

Three Ideas to Remember

As you continue through this guide, keep these ideas in mind.

- More training is not always better training.
- Observation often leads to better decisions than immediate intervention.
- Some of the most valuable learning happens during the quiet moments between the training exercises.

Over the years, I have become convinced that successful dog owners are not always the ones who know the most techniques.

Very often, they are the ones who know when not to use them. Sometimes the greatest gift we can give our dogs is not another instruction. It is the opportunity to think, recover and learn at their own pace.





Principle 5: Progress Rarely Looks Like Progress

One of the most difficult parts of living with a dog that has behavioural challenges is that improvement is rarely obvious.

When people begin working with me, they often hope there will be a moment when everything suddenly clicks into place. They imagine a walk where their reactive dog calmly passes every other dog they see, or a recall that works perfectly every single time. They look for a dramatic turning point that tells them all the hard work has finally paid off.

I understand why.

We all like clear signs that we are moving in the right direction. Whether we are learning a new language, recovering from an injury or trying to improve our fitness, visible progress gives us confidence to keep going.

Behaviour change, however, rarely works like that. In fact, one of the reasons owners become discouraged is because they are looking for the wrong signs.

They focus on the behaviour they still dislike and overlook the dozens of small improvements happening underneath.

Over the years, I have become convinced that meaningful behaviour change usually begins long before owners recognise it.

The Victories We Don't Notice

Imagine you are living with a reactive dog.

Perhaps six months ago they reacted to every dog they saw, regardless of distance. Every walk felt stressful, and simply leaving the house became something you dreaded.

Now imagine that after several weeks of careful work, your dog still reacts. At first glance, it feels as though nothing has changed. But look a little closer:

- Perhaps they now look at the other dog before barking instead of reacting immediately
- Perhaps they recover in thirty seconds rather than five minutes





- Perhaps they only react when another dog is close instead of reacting at every dog in sight
- Perhaps they are checking in with you more often
- Perhaps they are walking more calmly between difficult moments

Those improvements are easy to miss because owners naturally focus on the barking that still happened. The dog, however, has already begun changing. The foundations are being built. Meaningful progress often starts quietly.

Behaviour Is Rarely a Straight Line

One of the biggest myths in dog training is the idea that improvement should happen in a smooth, predictable way. TV shows are a partly responsible for this. When edited into 30mins, every behavioural problem with a dog seems perfectly straightforward to resolve.

Anyone who has lived with a dog knows that reality is very different.

Some days everything seems to go well, the next day it feels as though all the progress has disappeared.

Owners often tell me they feel as though they are taking one step forward and two steps back.

Most of the time, that isn't actually what is happening. Dogs have good days and difficult days, just as we do.

They are influenced by sleep, health, weather, previous experiences, excitement, stress, changes to routine and countless other factors that we rarely think about.

One difficult walk does not erase twenty successful ones. One reaction does not mean your dog has forgotten everything they have learned.

Progress is often messy. That is completely normal.

Learning To Look for Different Things

As my own understanding of behaviour developed, I realised I had also changed the way I measured success.





Years ago, I might have judged a consultation by asking whether the unwanted behaviour had stopped.

Today, I ask different questions:

- Is the dog recovering more quickly?
- Are they coping better?
- Are they making more thoughtful decisions?
- Are they becoming more confident?
- Is communication between the owner and dog improving?

Those questions often reveal progress that would otherwise remain invisible.

Behaviour is important, of course. But behaviour is often the final piece of the puzzle rather than the first.

When emotional state improves, behaviour frequently follows. That is why I encourage owners to celebrate the small moments:

- The first time your dog pauses before reacting.
- The first time they choose to look back at you.
- The first time they settle more quickly after a walk.
- The first time they calmly walk past something that would previously have overwhelmed them.

Those moments matter. In fact, they often matter more than owners realise.

Confidence Is Built Gradually

When people think about confidence, they often imagine something that appears suddenly.

One day a dog is nervous, the next day they are confident. Real confidence rarely develops that way. It grows through experience.

Every positive interaction, every successful walk and every situation the dog learns to cope with adds another small piece to the puzzle.

Most of these moments seem insignificant on their own. Together, they gradually change the way the dog experiences the world.





That is why patience is so important. We are not looking for dramatic transformations every week. We are looking for steady, sustainable improvement over time. Those are very different goals.

Trust The Process

One of the conversations I have most often with owners happens a few weeks into a behaviour programme.

They tell me they aren't sure whether things are improving. Then we start talking about the previous month:

- The dog now settles more easily in the evening
- Walks feel less stressful
- The owner feels more confident
- Recovery is quicker
- The dog is more responsive
- Family life is becoming calmer

Suddenly, they realise that a great deal has changed.

They simply hadn't noticed because they were looking at the one behaviour that still needed work.

This is something I try to remind myself of as well. Progress is rarely obvious while we are living through it. It usually becomes clear when we stop and look back.

Keep Showing Up

There is a quote I have always liked: "*Consistency beats intensity.*"

I think that idea applies perfectly to dog behaviour. Owners sometimes believe they need the perfect training session or the perfect walk.

In reality, what dogs usually benefit from is something much simpler:

- Consistent guidance
- Consistent routines
- Consistent expectations
- Consistent opportunities to learn





Those small moments, repeated over weeks and months, often achieve far more than occasional bursts of intense effort.

Behaviour change is rarely built in a single afternoon. It is built through hundreds of ordinary days.

Three Ideas to Remember

As you continue through this guide, keep these ideas in mind:

- Progress is often happening long before it becomes obvious.
- Small improvements usually come before dramatic changes.
- Consistency and patience almost always outperform quick fixes.

If your dog is finding life difficult at the moment, try not to judge your success by whether everything is perfect.

Instead, ask yourself whether your dog is coping a little better than they were a month ago:

- Are they recovering more quickly?
- Are they making slightly better decisions?
- Do they seem just a little more relaxed?

If the answer is yes, then progress is already happening.

It may not feel dramatic, it may not always be obvious, but those small changes are often the beginning of something much bigger. And in my experience, those are the changes that last.

Principle 6: Relationships Matter More Than Techniques

If there is one thing I have become less interested in over the years, it is finding the perfect technique.

That might sound like an odd statement coming from someone whose job involves helping people solve behaviour problems.

When owners contact me, they are often hoping for a particular exercise, a new lead, a clever training game or a technique they haven't tried before. They want





the missing piece of the puzzle. Something practical they can begin using as soon as our conversation ends.

I completely understand that. We all like practical solutions. The difficulty is that dog behaviour rarely changes because of a single technique.

Instead, it usually changes because of hundreds of small interactions that gradually shape the relationship between owner and dog.

The more dogs I have worked with, the more convinced I have become that relationships are not built during the difficult moments. They are built during all the ordinary ones.

The Small Moments Matter

When people think about training, they often picture organised sessions. Perhaps they imagine practising recall in a field or teaching a puppy to sit in the kitchen.

Those moments certainly have value, but they make up only a tiny fraction of the time we spend with our dogs.

Most relationships are built somewhere else:

- They are built on quiet walks
- They are built while waiting at the front door before going outside
- They are built while sharing the living room in the evening
- They are built through consistency, predictability and hundreds of interactions that seem almost too ordinary to notice

Dogs are remarkably good observers. They learn about us every single day. They learn whether we are patient or impatient. Whether we remain calm when things become difficult. Whether our responses are predictable. Whether they can trust us to guide them through situations they find confusing or frightening.

In many ways, they are learning about us just as much as we are learning about them.

Trust Is Quiet

When people hear the word *trust*, they often imagine dramatic moments:





- A rescue dog finally allowing someone to stroke them
- A nervous dog walking confidently through a busy environment
- A reactive dog calmly passing another dog

Those moments are wonderful to witness, but trust rarely appears suddenly:

- It grows quietly
- It grows when owners respond consistently
- It grows when expectations remain clear
- It grows when dogs discover that their owner will not panic simply because the environment has become challenging

Over time, the relationship becomes predictable. That predictability creates confidence. Confidence creates calmer decisions. Calmer decisions often create better behaviour. Everything is connected.

Communication Goes Both Ways

One mistake I think we sometimes make is assuming communication means telling our dogs what we want them to do.

Of course, communication is part of training. Dogs need guidance, they need information, and they need to understand the world we are asking them to live in.

But communication also involves listening.

The best trainers I have met are not simply good at giving information, they are exceptionally good at receiving it.

They notice changes in posture. They recognise when a dog becomes uncertain. They understand when excitement is beginning to tip into frustration. They notice the small changes that happen long before behaviour becomes obvious.

In many ways, behaviour consultations involve far more observation than instruction.

That has certainly become true in my own work. The more carefully I watch dogs, the less I feel the need to rush towards solutions. Understanding nearly always comes first.





Relationships Create Confidence

Think about a young child walking into an unfamiliar room. Very often they will glance back towards a parent.

Not because they need permission to take every step, but because that familiar person provides reassurance while they work out how they feel about the situation.

Dogs often do something remarkably similar. Owners sometimes describe it as their dog "checking in."

I think it tells us something much deeper. It tells us that the relationship itself has become a source of information.

The owner has become part of how the dog understands the world. That doesn't happen because somebody taught a command. It happens because trust has developed over time. Relationships influence behaviour in ways that techniques alone rarely can.

There Is No Perfect Method

One of the reasons dog training can feel confusing is because there are so many different methods.

Every trainer seems to have their own system, every book promises a slightly different approach, every video claims to have found the answer.

The longer I have worked with dogs, the less interested I have become in searching for the perfect method:

- Good training matters
- Good timing matters
- Good technique matters

But none of those things exist in isolation.

They all depend upon the relationship in which they take place.

The same exercise delivered by two different owners may produce completely different results because the relationship is different.





The technique has not changed. The context has. That is why I believe relationships deserve far more attention than they often receive.

Becoming The Person Your Dog Needs

Perhaps the biggest shift in my own thinking has been this.

Years ago, I spent much of my time asking: *"What should I teach this dog?"*

Today, I often ask myself something different: *"What kind of person does this dog need me to be?"*

- Do they need me to remain calm
- Do they need me to slow down?
- Do they need clearer guidance?
- Do they need more patience?
- Do they simply need me to understand what they are finding difficult?

Those questions have changed not only the way I work with dogs, but the way I work with owners too.

Because improving behaviour is rarely just about changing the dog. Sometimes it begins with changing ourselves.

Three Ideas to Remember

As you reach the final principle, keep these ideas with you.

- Relationships are built through thousands of ordinary interactions, not a handful of extraordinary ones.
- Dogs learn about us every day, just as we learn about them.
- The strongest relationships are built on trust, consistency and understanding rather than constant instruction.

When owners ask me what the most important part of dog training is, they often expect me to mention recall, loose lead walking or obedience.

Those things all have their place. But if I had to choose only one thing, I would choose the relationship every single time.





Because techniques come and go. Training methods evolve. Research continues to improve our understanding of dogs.

A strong relationship, however, gives every piece of learning somewhere to grow. And in my experience, that is something no technique can ever replace.

Principle 7: Never Stop Learning from Your Dog

When people ask me what has taught me the most about dog behaviour, they are often surprised by my answer.

They expect me to mention a particular course, a mentor or a book.

Those things have all played an important role in my development, and I continue to learn from them today.

But the greatest teachers I have ever had have always been the dogs themselves.

Not because dogs consciously teach us, but because they constantly give us opportunities to question our own assumptions.

Every behaviour consultation has taught me something. Every dog that didn't respond in the way I expected has taught me something. Every owner who challenged my thinking, every mistake I have made, every success I couldn't fully explain at the time has gradually shaped the way I now understand behaviour.

Looking back, I realise that some of the biggest changes in my thinking didn't happen because I discovered new information.

They happened because I became more willing to admit that I might not yet understand what I was seeing. That is a very different mindset.

Curiosity Changes Everything

Early in our lives with dogs, most of us spend a great deal of time looking for answers:

- How do I stop pulling?
- How do I stop barking?
- How do I improve recall?





Those are perfectly reasonable questions.

Eventually, however, I think something more valuable begins to happen. The questions themselves start to change.

Instead of asking, *"How do I stop this behaviour?"*, we begin asking, *"Why is this behaviour happening?"*

Instead of asking, *"Why won't my dog listen?"*, we ask, *"What might my dog be finding difficult right now?"*

Those questions rarely produce instant answers. What they do produce is curiosity. Curiosity changes the way we observe. It changes the way we respond.

Most importantly, it changes the relationship we build with our dogs.

- Once we become curious, behaviour stops feeling like something to fight against and starts becoming something to understand.

Every Dog Is Different

One of the reasons I am cautious about offering simple answers is because I have never met two identical dogs.

Even dogs from the same litter can experience the world in remarkably different ways:

- One may recover quickly after a frightening experience, another may remember it for weeks
- One may love meeting other dogs, another may find the same interaction overwhelming.
- One may learn a new behaviour after a handful of repetitions, another may need much more time.

None of those dogs are wrong. They are simply different.

The more dogs I have worked with, the less interested I have become in finding rules that apply to every dog.

Instead, I have become much more interested in understanding the individual standing in front of me. That, I believe, is where good behaviour work begins.





There Will Always Be More to Learn

One of the things I love most about working with dogs is that I still find myself learning every week.

After thousands of consultations and many years of studying behaviour, dogs still surprise me.

They still challenge assumptions I thought were correct. They still remind me that behaviour is wonderfully complex. I hope that never changes.

Because the moment we believe we have nothing left to learn is often the moment we stop paying attention.

Good trainers remain students. Good owners do too.

The best dog owners I know are not necessarily the ones who know the most. They are the ones who remain open-minded. They continue asking questions. They continue observing. They continue adapting as they learn more about the dog sharing their life.

Your Dog Doesn't Need Perfection

One of the saddest things I see is owners believing they are failing because their dog is not perfect. Social media rarely helps.

Every day we are shown beautifully edited videos of dogs performing perfect recalls, walking flawlessly to heel and ignoring every distraction. Real life is different:

Real dogs get excited – they become frustrated, they make mistakes. Real owners do too.

The goal is not perfection. The goal is understanding.

Your dog does not need you to know everything. They do not need you to become the world's greatest trainer. They need someone who is willing to learn alongside them:

- Someone who is patient when progress feels slow
- Someone who is curious enough to ask questions before jumping to conclusions





- Someone who keeps showing up, even when things feel difficult

In my experience, those qualities matter far more than achieving perfect obedience.

The Journey Never Really Ends

One of the unexpected joys of owning a dog is that the relationship continues to evolve.

The dog you live with today will not be exactly the same dog in a year's time, and the relationship won't be either:

- They will mature
- Their confidence will grow
- Their experiences will shape them
- Your understanding of them will deepen
- You will notice things you never noticed before
- You will begin anticipating situations that once caught you by surprise
- You will become better at reading their body language
- You will understand what they need more quickly than you once did

Without realising it, you will both have changed.

That is one of the reasons I enjoy behaviour work so much. It is not simply about solving problems. It is about helping people build stronger relationships with another species.

Few things are more rewarding than watching an owner begin to understand their dog in a way they never thought possible.

Looking Back

If there is one message I hope runs through every page of this guide, it is this: Dogs make far more sense than we often give them credit for.

Their behaviour is rarely random:

- Their emotions matter
- Their experiences matter





- Their relationships matter

When we begin looking beneath the behaviour itself, we often discover that many of the challenges we face become far less mysterious.

We stop asking how to control our dogs. Instead, we begin asking how we can help them. That small change in perspective has influenced every part of my own work.

It has changed the questions I ask during consultations. It has changed the way I think about training. Most importantly, it has changed the way I see dogs.

I hope, in some small way, it has begun to change the way you see yours as well.

Three Ideas to Remember

As you finish this guide, I hope you take these final ideas with you.

- Never stop being curious about your dog.
- Progress comes from understanding, not simply from teaching.
- The strongest relationships are built by people who remain willing to learn.

Everything we have explored throughout these seven principles can be summarised in one simple thought.

The better we understand our dogs, the better decisions we make for them.

Those better decisions create calmer dogs, more confident owners and stronger relationships.

And that, perhaps more than anything else, is what good dog behaviour is really about.

Conclusion

If you've reached the end of this guide, I'd like to thank you for spending the time to read it.

There are countless articles, videos and opinions available online about dog behaviour. Some are excellent, some are well intentioned, and some can leave





owners feeling more confused than when they started. My hope has never been to add more noise to that conversation.

Instead, I hope these pages have encouraged you to look at your dog a little differently.

When I first began working with dogs, I was fascinated by behaviour itself. Like many people entering the profession, I focused on what dogs were doing. Why they barked. Why they lunged. Why they pulled on the lead. Why they ignored their owners. Those were the questions that filled my notebooks, my bookshelves and my conversations.

The more dogs I worked with, however, the more I realised that behaviour was only ever part of the story.

Behind every behaviour was a dog trying to cope with the world in the best way they knew how.

- Sometimes they were frightened
- Sometimes they were frustrated
- Sometimes they were simply overwhelmed by situations they had never learned to navigate successfully

The behaviour was important, but it was rarely the whole picture.

That realisation gradually changed the way I approached every behaviour consultation.

Rather than asking, *"How do we stop this behaviour?"*, I became much more interested in understanding *why* the behaviour was happening in the first place.

Those questions continue to shape the way I work today. They have also shaped every principle in this guide.

If there is one message I hope you take away, it is that meaningful behaviour change rarely begins with finding the perfect technique.

It begins with understanding:

- Understanding what your dog is experiencing
- Understanding how their emotional state influences their behaviour
- Understanding that progress is rarely a straight line
- Understanding that relationships are built over thousands of ordinary moments rather than a handful of extraordinary ones





Most importantly, understanding that your dog is not trying to make life difficult for you.

Like all of us, they are simply responding to the world as they currently understand it.

That perspective doesn't excuse every behaviour, nor does it mean we shouldn't have expectations of our dogs. They still need guidance, boundaries and opportunities to learn. Good training remains an incredibly important part of helping dogs live successfully alongside us.

But I have found that training becomes far more effective when it is built on understanding rather than frustration.

That simple idea has influenced every part of my own journey.

It formed the foundation of my book, *Reactive to Regulated*, where I explored how emotional state influences behaviour and why so many behavioural problems begin long before we see the behaviour itself. If the ideas in this guide have resonated with you and you would like to explore them in much greater depth, I hope you'll consider reading it. Many owners have told me it changed the way they think about their dogs, and I sincerely hope it might do the same for you.

Of course, books are only one part of the journey.

No two dogs are identical, and no guide, however comprehensive, can fully replace working with the individual dog standing in front of you. Every family is different. Every home is different. Every dog arrives with their own history, personality and experiences.

That is why I continue to enjoy working directly with owners. Every consultation teaches me something new, and every dog reminds me that there is always more to learn.

If this guide has encouraged you to become more curious about your own dog, then it has achieved exactly what I hoped it would.

Keep observing. Keep asking questions. Keep celebrating the small victories that are so easy to overlook. Most importantly, keep enjoying the relationship you are building together.

Dogs have an extraordinary ability to enrich our lives.





They make us laugh, challenge our patience, encourage us to spend more time outdoors and often teach us as much about ourselves as we ever teach them.

They are not looking for perfect owners. They are looking for patient ones.

Curious ones. Consistent ones. Owners who are willing to learn, and laugh, alongside them.

If you can become that person, you are already giving your dog something far more valuable than another training technique.

You are giving them the understanding they need to thrive.

Thank you once again for reading, and I wish you and your dog every success on the journey ahead.

Continue Your Journey

Thank you for taking the time to read this guide.

I genuinely hope it has encouraged you to look at your dog a little differently.

If there is one thing I have learned from working with well over a thousand dogs, it is that behaviour is rarely as complicated as it first appears once we begin asking the right questions. Dogs make far more sense than we often give them credit for, and understanding why behaviour happens is usually the first step towards changing it.

Of course, no single guide can answer every question.

Every dog is different, every family is different, and every behaviour case brings its own unique challenges. If you would like to continue learning, there are several ways we can continue that journey together.

Read *Reactive to Regulated*

If you enjoyed the ideas in this guide, you may enjoy my book *Reactive to Regulated*.





The book explores behaviour in much greater depth, looking at why dogs become reactive, frustrated, anxious and overwhelmed, and how emotional state influences the way dogs think, learn and respond to the world around them.

Many owners have told me that reading the book completely changed the way they understand their dog's behaviour, and it remains the foundation of the way I approach behaviour consultations today.

Visit The Oxford Dog Training Company

My website contains a growing library of articles covering dog behaviour, training, puppy development, reactivity and emotional regulation.

My aim is to publish thoughtful, evidence-informed articles that help owners understand not just *what* dogs do, but *why* they do it.

Whether you're looking for practical advice or simply enjoy learning more about canine behaviour, I hope you'll find something useful there.

Website:

www.oxforddogtrainingcompany.com

Join My Monthly Newsletter

Each month I share practical insights, observations from real behaviour cases, new articles, book updates and training ideas that you can apply with your own dog.

Rather than filling your inbox every week, I focus on sending one thoughtful email each month that I hope you'll genuinely enjoy reading.

If that sounds useful, I'd love for you to join the community.





Work With Me

If you're struggling with your own dog's behaviour, remember that you don't have to work through it alone.

Every dog is an individual, and while books and guides can provide valuable knowledge, there is no substitute for understanding the dog standing in front of you.

Whether you're dealing with reactivity, anxiety, frustration, aggression, puppy behaviour or simply want to build a stronger relationship with your dog, I'd be delighted to help.

You can find information about consultations, training programmes and upcoming courses on my website. These are available both in person, and online.

Keep Learning

The most rewarding part of working with dogs is realising that there is always something new to discover.

The more we observe, the more curious we become. The more curious we become, the better we understand our dogs. And the better we understand them, the better decisions we make on their behalf.

That journey never really ends. I hope this guide has become one small part of yours.

Thank you once again for reading, and I wish you many happy years with your dog.

