



Generalization

What behaviors does your dog know, truly? Sit, down, stay? Does she know “sit,” but only if you’re holding a cookie? Or only if there are no distractions? For a dog to really “know” a behavior, it takes a lot of repetition, and a process called generalization.

Generalization simply means that when you ask your dog to do something, it means the same thing regardless of the scenario or environment. Dogs are picture processors, and take little mental snapshots of the behaviors we teach them. If we only ever teach them a behavior in one setting, and in one context, they will only know the behavior that way. Think of it like an internet search for the picture of “sit.” If your dog does a search for sit and the only picture they have is in one location, in one context, and with no distractions, then that is what “sit” means for them. Generalizing a behavior takes time and patience. We hear so often that “he knows this!” when in reality, your pup knows the behavior *only* in that certain context: they only have that one photo! You may notice that your pup is great at home, but seems to forget what “sit” means anywhere else. For your pup to really “know” a behavior, you must practice in multiple locations, and with varying levels of distractions.

We’ll start first at home, or wherever you originally taught the behavior. With your dog standing in front of you, ask her to “sit.” Were you successful? Notice the position of your hands, the inflection in your voice, any physical cues, and how many times you had to ask your dog. Any of these will factor in to how your dog is cued to sit, and they will notice when you don’t do them. Work up to standing neutral, neutral hands (hands at your side, not luring) and your normal voice, and be able to confidently say that your dog knows “sit” in *this* context.

Here’s where we start to generalize. Once you are sure that your dog knows “sit” while she is standing in front of you, change your body position. Sit down in a chair or sit on the floor and ask your dog to sit without any physical cues. Change the context of what *you* are doing when you ask your dog to sit. Most often we find that once we change this picture, “when mom is facing me and says ‘sit,’ I do this,” most dogs tend to get a little confused. All of this is still in the original location that you originally taught your dog sit.

Once we have started to change the context for our dogs, “no matter what position mom is in, when she says “sit” I do this,” we can start working in new locations. From wherever you originally taught the sit, move to a slightly different environment. If you’re in a house, move to the backyard. If you’re in an apartment, try the patio or hallway. Now we have a new a change in scenery, and additional change in context. Sit is no longer “when we’re in the house, no matter what mom is doing, ‘sit’ means this,” and your dog will start to generalize the behavior to different locations.



Now that we have altered the context and the location, we can dive into distractions. When we're dealing with distractions, we need to think about *intensity* and *distance*. Think about what distracts your dog most. Is it squirrels? People? Imagine a scenario where your dog will be exposed to their favorite distraction. If your dog loves children, the highest level distraction would be standing in a playground in the middle of recess. In this scenario there is no distance between your dog and the exciting children, and the sight and sound of them is at full intensity. This is a scenario that you could work up to, but only after first working at a much greater distance with much less intensity. We want to set our dogs up for success and go at their pace. If you find that your dog is really struggling with a behavior that she's done well at home, assess the distance and intensity of what's distracting her. If your dog can sit without physical prompts 30 ft from the playground, try 20 ft. If 20 ft is too close, try 25 ft. Adjust your distance from a distraction to play with the intensity. Keep sessions short and positive, with a high rate of success. Distance is your friend! We could write a whole book focusing only on how to train your dog around distractions, but the first step is to add distance.

Generalization is hard work, but is the necessary step to ensure that your dog really *knows* a behavior. Every behavior you teach your dog can and should be generalized. Each learner is different and will require patience and consistency from you. It's important to know that your dog is never giving you a hard time, they are doing the best they can with the information you provided them.