



Generalizing

Generalizing behaviors simply means when you ask your dog to perform a behavior, your dog understands the behavior means the same thing no matter where you are or what you are doing.

Dogs do not generalize well and they certainly do not generalize to the same degree that humans can. This can lead to a lot of frustration for you and your dog. Mistaking a behavior that has not been generalized as non-compliance can be truly detrimental for your relationship.

How many times have you thought, “I don’t know why he’s not doing it, he does it all the time at home?” This is because your dog doesn’t understand that your cues and his behaviors mean the same thing in every scenario. Sometimes doing something as simple as turning your body in a different direction or moving a different body part when you ask for a behavior can completely confuse your dog.

If you want a behavior to become universal and for your dog to generalize well, you must broaden the criteria for performing that behavior as soon as you can. Once you have your dog responding consistently to a cue for a specific behavior, you should start generalizing it. You must get your dog to perform the behavior on different surfaces (grass, concrete, carpet, wood, gravel), in different places (kitchen, bathroom, the park, PetSmart), with different sounds (TV on, TV off, as the doorbell rings, the teapot whistles, while dogs are barking), and near different objects (near a dumpster, a tree, a parked car, a new person). Only then will a behavior be generalized.

This concept is especially important with behaviors that aid in safety. Can your dog respond to Come When Called when there is a squirrel in front of him? How does he know to leave a dead bird, if you’ve only used Leave It with treats and toys? Preparing your dog by generalizing behaviors is the answer to both questions. It could be the difference between a happy, healthy life and a serious injury or worse.





Tips for Generalizing

Make it Easy

- Start by practicing the behavior in the place you first taught it, before going into a new scenario; this way it's fresh in your dog's mind.
- Give your dog time to calm down and adjust to the new scenario before you start.
- Use the best treats when you start generalizing a behavior.
- Start with some basic focusing behaviors, like Automatic Focus and Hand Target, to build confidence when you're in a new scenario.
- "Jackpot" by giving your dog many treats, one at a time, when you reward the behavior in the new scenario.
- Be very encouraging and enthusiastic about successes. You should truly be proud!

When beginning the generalization process, you can "shape" the behavior by rewarding progress even if it doesn't look perfect at first. Remember, for your dog, this behavior may not mean the same thing in a different scenario. For example, if you have a shorter dog who doesn't like sitting in grass, start with very short grass and work your way to taller grass.

Body Position

- Start by asking your dog to perform the behavior while you are standing directly in front of him to refresh your dog on the skill.
- Ask for the behavior as you turn your body to the left.
- Repeat with your body turned to the right.
- Take one step to the right and cue.
- Take one step to the left and cue.
- Rotate 180 degrees and ask for the behavior.
- Begin moving random body parts (raise hand, lift foot off ground) as you cue the behavior.

Repeat each step until consistent. Only move on to the next step in each scenario once you have achieved a high success rate in the previous step. Once you are having consistent success with each step individually, you can begin combining, varying the steps, and increasing difficulty.