

Become a behaviour detective: what is your dog really trying to tell you?

“Help! My puppy won't stop biting.”

“Our dog barks every time someone comes to the door.”

“He jumps on everyone.”

“She's stubborn.”

If you've ever found yourself saying one of these things, you're certainly not alone.



As a dog trainer, these are the conversations I have every week. Most people come to me wanting to know how to stop a behaviour. It's understandable. Living with barking, nipping, jumping or pulling on the leash can be frustrating. We love our dogs, but sometimes we simply want peace in our homes.

Early in my career, I focused on finding the best training exercises to change behaviour. Those exercises certainly have their place, but becoming a Licensed Family Dog Mediator® completely changed my perspective.

Instead of asking, “How do we stop this behaviour?” I learned to ask, “What is this behaviour trying to tell us?” That simple shift changed everything.

Whether your dog has been with you since they were eight weeks old or joined your family through a rescue organization, every behaviour tells us something. We may never know every experience that shaped our dogs before they came into our lives, but we can learn an incredible amount by observing the dog standing in front of us today.

Before I suggest a single training exercise, I put on my detective hat. Because every behaviour leaves clues.

The behaviour detective

Think about detectives in your favourite mystery novel. They don't arrive at the scene and immediately decide who committed the crime. They gather evidence. They interview witnesses. They look for patterns. Only then do they begin putting the pieces together.

Dogs deserve the same curiosity. When we skip straight to fixing a behaviour, we sometimes miss the reason it exists in the first place. And often, the behaviour isn't the problem. It's the clue.

The puppy who wouldn't stop biting

One family came to me feeling completely overwhelmed by their young puppy. "He bites everything," they told me. Hands. Pant legs. Shoelaces. Socks. They loved this little puppy, but they were exhausted.

Instead of starting with training, I started asking questions. What does a typical day look like? How much sleep is he getting? What happens between all of those play sessions?

As they described his routine, the picture became clearer. This puppy was constantly busy with walks, play, family and friends visiting, training sessions and evening excitement. He wasn't getting enough opportunities to simply rest.

Just like young children, puppies need an incredible amount of sleep for their growing brains and bodies. When they become overtired and overstimulated, they often lose the ability to regulate themselves. The result can be zoomies, frantic behaviour, nipping, biting and difficulty settling.

The solution wasn't more exercise. It wasn't stricter rules. It was balance. We introduced regular nap times, shorter play sessions, calming activities and opportunities to decompress throughout the day. Within a short time, the family noticed something remarkable — their puppy was finally getting what he needed.

The dog who barked through dinner

Another family reached out because their dog barked whenever visitors arrived and every evening as they sat down for dinner. Their first assumption? "He just wants attention."

Again, we became detectives. Like so many families today, both pet parents worked full-time. Their mornings were rushed. Their evenings were spent catching up on chores, making dinner and preparing for the next day. Their dog had spent much of the day waiting for interaction, adventure and something meaningful to do.

His barking wasn't about being difficult. It was communication. Together, we introduced slow sniffy walks, puzzle feeders, food-search games and short training sessions that encouraged him to use his incredible brain and natural instincts.

The transformation wasn't magical. It was logical. As his days became richer and more fulfilling, his barking gradually decreased. A fulfilled dog has much less reason to shout.

Every behaviour has a story

One of the biggest lessons I've learned is this: two dogs can show exactly the same behaviour for completely different reasons.

With a rescue dog, we may never know every experience they had before joining our family — and that's okay. While their history may provide pieces of the puzzle, it's only one part of the picture. What matters most is the information they're giving us today.

How do they respond to new people? When do they seem most relaxed? What helps them feel safe? What activities bring them joy? Those observations become some of our most valuable clues.

The more curious we become, the more we can understand what our dogs are communicating — even if we don't know everything they've experienced before coming into our lives.

Looking beyond the behaviour

As a Family Dog Mediator®, I've learned to look beyond the obvious. Every dog is influenced by many factors — their inherited traits, their current environment, their unique personality and all the experiences that have shaped them, whether we know those experiences or not.

When we consider the whole dog instead of focusing only on the behaviour, we stop chasing quick fixes and start creating lasting change. That's when training becomes about more than teaching a dog to sit, stay or come. It becomes about building trust, building confidence and strengthening the relationship we share with our dogs.

The next time your dog frustrates you

Before asking, "How do I stop this?" pause for a moment. Put on your detective hat. Ask yourself, "What is my dog trying to tell me?"

That one question can completely change the conversation. Whether you've raised your dog from puppyhood or welcomed a rescue whose history is largely unknown, the goal is the same. Our job isn't simply to stop the behaviour. Our job is to understand the dog standing in front of us today.

While we can't always change a dog's past, we can help shape their future.

And to me, that's where meaningful training and meaningful relationships begin.

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