...sending your dog the wrong message...

"Objectionable pet behavior is the No. 1 reason people have unsatisfactory relationships with their dog," says Dr. Rolan Tripp, veterinarian and behaviorist who spoke on animal behavior to veterinary students at the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine. More dogs die as a result of behavior problems than all preventable medical problems combined. Frustrated owners simply give up, and their untrained dogs often end up in animal shelters with uncertain fates.

Part of the problem lies in miscommunication. It's easier than you think to teach your dog the wrong thing. Well-meaning owners do it all the time. We've all seen owners yell and yell for a dog to come as the dog blissfully ignores the command, madly chasing squirrels instead. When finally the dog comes, the frustrated owner may pop the dog on the nose and yell some more. The message? Would you go to somebody who might hit and yell at you? Consistent training and positive reinforcement with treats and praise work a lot better to enforce the right message.

Teaching a dog proper behavior means knowing how to correct him when he does something inappropriate. Dr. Tripp points out that there are both good and bad ways to correct a pet. Owners should avoid spanking, kicking, "rubbing his nose in it," or yelling at a dog. Besides rarely communicating the message the owner intends, this type of correction can cause even more behavior problems.

"If you spank a dog for going to the bathroom inside, the message is, 'don't do it when I'm looking,'" says Dr. Tripp. "By rubbing his nose in it, the dog thinks, 'you want me to eat my own feces?' That can cause coprophagia [eating feces]."

Good corrections interrupt the undesirable behavior, then give a positive command, such as "sit." "When the dog doesn't 'sit,' ignore her and walk away," says Dr. Tripp. "Try again after two or three minutes of isolation. When she does it right, praise her."

Appropriate interruptions can include water spray, a collar correction, and use of a head halter. Many owners find that water in a spray bottle is an effective way to distract a barking or jumping dog, so that you can reward the opposite-being quiet. But sometimes owners will look to prong collars or choke collars for help in controlling behavior problems. Remember that these collars are not a substitute for putting in the time needed for obedience training and that they can be very dangerous.

"Collar corrections, especially choke chains, are overdone and misused by almost every owner. Used properly, a choke chain is meant to make a noisy 'pop,' not to jerk the dog around by his neck. These collars can easily damage a dog's neck, or asphyxiate and even
kill a dog," says Dr. Tripp. If you want to try a correction collar, make sure you learn to use it correctly.

Head halters that go around a dog's muzzle and just behind the ears are a great alternative to the traditional neck collar, or prong collars, since they avoid putting pressure on the vertebrae of the neck, the thyroid, and trachea. They work by putting pressure on the muzzle and scruff-two areas to which a dog is naturally responsive. The collar also pulls the dog's entire head around so that when she pulls, she looks back toward the walker. "Dogs may struggle with the head halter for the first ten minutes, but after that they don't seem to notice it and are much more obedient," says Dr. Tripp.

A common history in dogs with behavior problems is that they are not walked regularly. Owners may have difficulty walking a dog that pulls, so walks become less and less frequent. A dog that is not exercised regularly will find other -- often destructive -- ways to vent his energy. That's why teaching your dog to walk calmly on a leash is so important. "If the dog pulls on the leash, change directions suddenly. Whoever determines the direction has leadership. The idea is to interrupt the bad behavior and praise the good," says Dr. Tripp.

Learning to communicate with your dog is complicated. But when it comes to dogs, a little patience and consistent training will earn you years of enjoyment. Talk to your veterinarian or enroll in a local training class to master the communication tools you need to make the most of your relationship with your dog. You'll find more behavior tips from Dr. Tripp online in the "Behavior Center" section of www.petopia.com <http://www.petopia.com/>. 