

KATHY KOPELLIS McLEOD



The respected WA dog behaviour consultant helps us understand our canine companions

Does your dog throw temper tantrums? Taking a long-term approach to doggie demands can be worth the time and effort

PICTURE this: Your dog is outside, barking to get your attention. It's an attempt to get inside. You know it's not right to reward this demand barking, so you decide to ride it out until the barking stops.

You wait, only to discover that your dog is making even more effort to grab your attention. It's now barking louder, longer and with increased intensity.

You continue to ignore it, but notice that the intensity and volume of the barking is getting worse. The ante has been upped and now the dog has begun to scratch at the door for extra effect.

You are normally a patient person, but you find yourself reaching breaking point. Giving into annoyance, you shout out, "Rover, be quiet!".

Your dog momentarily stops, expecting that its persistence has paid off and that you'll oblige its vociferous request. When you don't, it starts up again with even more gusto.

You've already had a neighbour breathe down your neck about your dog's barking. So after some hardening of determination on your dog's part, and increased stress levels on yours, you give in and reluctantly allow your dog inside.

Bingo! The dog got what it wanted – the barking worked.

What you have just experienced with your dog is an "extinction burst", or what is more commonly known as a temper tantrum.

Extinction bursts are annoying emotional outbursts and, as with humans, occur in response to unfulfilled desires or needs.

In the short term, they are temporary inconveniences. But taking a long-term approach to handling doggie demands will be worth the time and effort.

For the purpose of this article we'll use attention-seeking barking as the example.

HOW IT WORKS

An extinction burst consists of a sudden and temporary increase in the frequency of barking and inappropriate behaviour.

You can expect to witness an extinction burst when you're setting new boundaries with your dog. Commit to stamping out the demand barking by ignoring it until it stops.

YELLING CAN MAKE MATTERS WORSE

Even if the attention your dog gets amounts to nothing more than being yelled at, it is still attention, albeit negative attention. The behaviour has resulted in some acknowledgement.

If your dog is a high-spirited individual, this negative attention often gives them more ammunition to fire up.

REMEMBER YOUR DOG WHEN THEY DO OFFER WHAT YOU WANT

While ignoring the bossy barking, it's only fair to acknowledge your dog when it has quit being a "try-hard". For instance, after the barking has subsided, you want to encourage more of this quiet behaviour.

There is less likelihood of regression if you are consistent with reinforcing any alternative behaviour that is desirable for both you and your dog.

IF YOU GIVE IN, YOUR DOG DOESN'T GIVE UP

It makes perfect dog-sense to persist with a behaviour even if it hasn't resulted immediately in the desired outcome. After all, there's always the chance of getting what it wants with increased efforts. So, if at any time during the outburst, you give in, not only will the behaviour persist, it will also strengthen.

WHAT TO DO AFTER THE EXTINCTION BURST

When your dog has finally settled down, calmly tell it, "Good dog". Avoid prolonged eye contact, as this can be the fuel that restarts another extinction burst session.

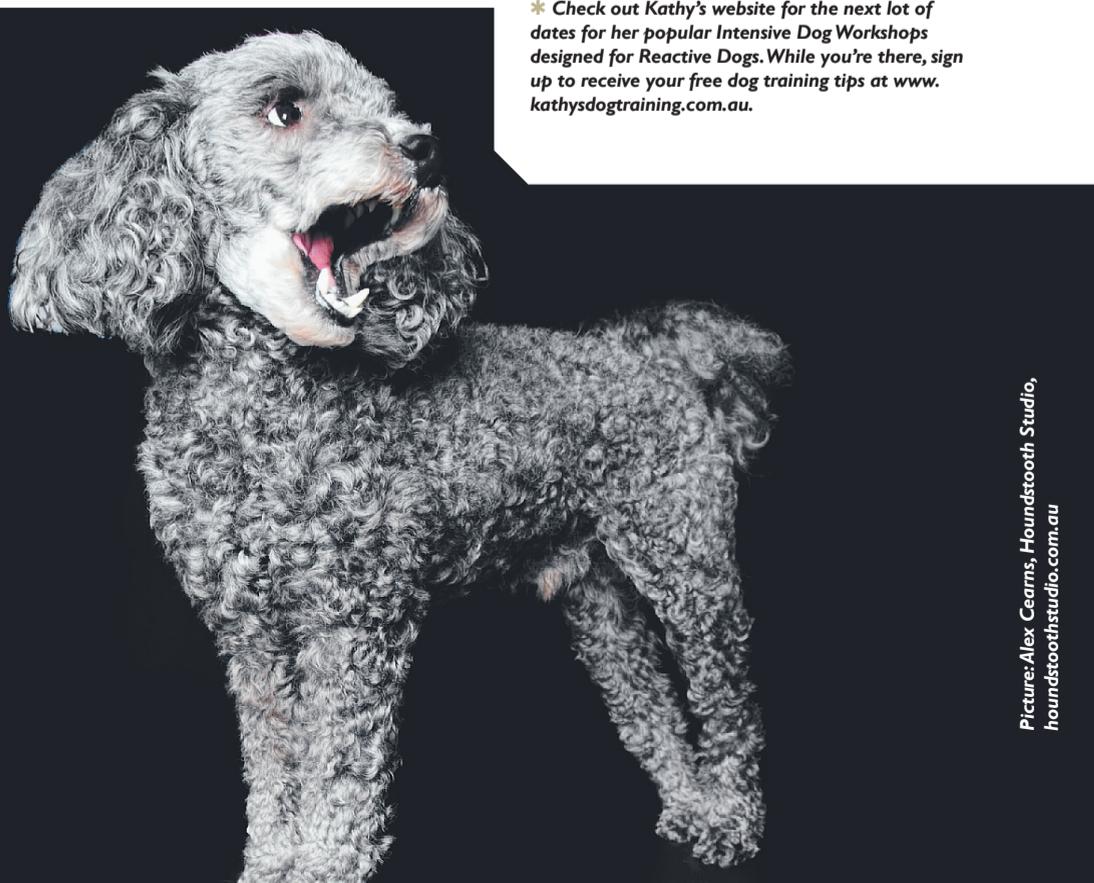
Fleeting glances and a calm acknowledgement of your dog's good behaviour are sufficient feedback. However, it should take prolonged, quiet behaviour for the dog to earn its ticket to get inside the house – and then, only if you wish it to.

While some dogs can persist with attention seeking until the cows come home, this process is effective in shaping desirable behaviour.

If you have a particularly challenging pet, there may be some history associated with the dogged persistence of its behaviour.

It's simply a part of the learning process. So stand firm, be patient and both you and your dog will benefit in the long run.

** Check out Kathy's website for the next lot of dates for her popular Intensive Dog Workshops designed for Reactive Dogs. While you're there, sign up to receive your free dog training tips at www.kathysdogtraining.com.au.*



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