



Impulse Control vs. Self Control



We hear this a lot in the dog training world, “my dog has no impulse control” or “Fido just lunges towards (fill in the blank – food, people...)”. We also come across this a lot in the human world as well. Some people cannot control their impulse to eat sweets, spend money or speak out of control. Even when we are aware of the consequences, our emotions get the best of us, and we react impulsively. In most cases we are “sorry” about our reactions. We wish we didn’t splurge or eat to the point of nausea. Yet we do not seem to learn that certain actions will have consequences. How is it that we repeatedly make choices that do not serve us well, even when we are well aware of the negative consequences?

Why is it that we expect our dogs to be able to do this when we cannot?

What's the Difference Anyway?

Self-control is described as choices we can control, and impulse control is those that we cannot. Impulse control issues result from either a reflex (such as a startle) or from being over threshold (being so upset or excited that the dog cannot make a conscious choice). The dog does not make the choice on how they react. He just does. Impulse control issues are not responsive to training.

Self-control issues result from conscious decision making; the dog decides whether or not to act. Therefore, we can influence a dog’s level of self-control through training.

Regardless of how much we like to believe that we are always making choices rationally, the reality is that both people and dogs often do things without thinking; we react impulsively and without thought at all. Impulse control challenges come from the dog’s inability to weigh the pluses and minuses.

If your dog reacts without thought – impulsively – then any consequences applied after the fact will not work.

For Example: You are alone in a room when someone quietly entered through the door behind you. You didn’t hear them enter, so when you turned around and saw them, you were startled and screamed. The other person didn’t appreciate your scream, so you got smacked on the head – which hurt! What happens the next time someone comes into the room unnoticed by you? Chances are you will still startle and utter a scream. In both cases you didn’t actually choose to scream in the first place; it happened reflexively.

To make the human less likely to startle and scream, we’d need to make some changes. We could encourage the person to sit facing the door – if they see someone else come in, there is no reason to startle. We could also make them aware of the fact that people frequently come and go, so they can begin to expect this change in the environment, which would reduce the likelihood that they would startle. No matter how you approach the problem, the first step is

to make the person conscious of what is happening, so they are not caught off guard. We want them in the “deciding” part of their brain, not the “reacting” part.

The same is true with dogs. To handle truly impulsive behaviour – as opposed to self-control issues – we need to make our dog aware and thoughtful about what’s going on. A point from reactions to thoughtful self-control. To do this:

1. Control the environment
2. Set up Training Opportunities for the dog to become familiar with what might happen in particular situations

Remember, it’s not about whether or not he WANTS to cooperate, it’s about whether or not he CAN cooperate. You can only train a rational and thinking animal. Impulsive animals are neither rational nor thinking.

The Role of Maturity on Impulsive Behaviour

Although we can improve self-control, we need to remember that there are biological realities that affect our dog’s ability to make the types of choices that we like to see. Age makes a tremendous difference on a dog’s ability for exercising self-control! – just like people! Just like people some will be better at it than others. The amount of training we need to invest will vary. For dogs young and learning, management is truly your best friend. When we are young our parents structure our choices to prevent too many misfortunes. Rather than teaching a young child not to eat ALL the cookies we simply bring out the number we are willing to give them and put the rest away. Just because your dog may “look” full grown, doesn’t mean their mental capacity it.

Teaching Self Control

1. Ensure that you have environmental control
 - a. This can be tedious but is critical to success
2. Make your dog aware of the item they want – KEY
3. Teach a behaviour that is incompatible with lunging towards the distraction
 - a. Heeling, recall, sit/stay, etc.
 - b. Behaviours must not be too hard and be fast paced
 - c. Hold the dog accountable to the behaviour
 - d. If dog is struggling; change to an easier exercise, get further away from the distraction, or raise your rate of reinforcement
4. If you need to take a break, ensure your dog is structured (down stay, crate etc.) enough to not make a bad impulsive decision.
 - a. Unless you are extremely confident your dog will not make a wrong choice you can set your dog free.
5. Keep sessions short as this training is stressful for dogs.

**If your dog is soft, tentative, and terribly interested in what you have to offer, skip self-control exercises altogether initially.*