

Can Old Dogs Learn New Tricks?

Life's wisdom is often shared in trite, easy to remember quips called *adages*. "Look before you leap." "A penny saved is a penny earned." "Don't judge a book by its cover." In with expansive world of old adages, one definitely stands out, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." This canine-focused saying is most certainly "one for the books."

Many of these old adages can't be traced back to their origins, but the reference to senior dogs and their learning capacity has a documented origin. The source of these well-worn words is an English gentleman named Fitzherbert who wrote a treatise on animal husbandry in 1523. In the cumbersome vernacular of the times, he said that "*the dogge must lerne when he is a whelpe, or els it wyl not be; for it is harde to make an old dogge to stoupe.*" In today's language, Fitzherbert's words might be roughly translated as "The dog must learn when he is first born or it is hard to make an old dog comply." Or more simply put, "*You can't teach an old dog new tricks.*" But, is there any truth to those curiously spelled old words or the more familiar translation?

Dispelling the myth

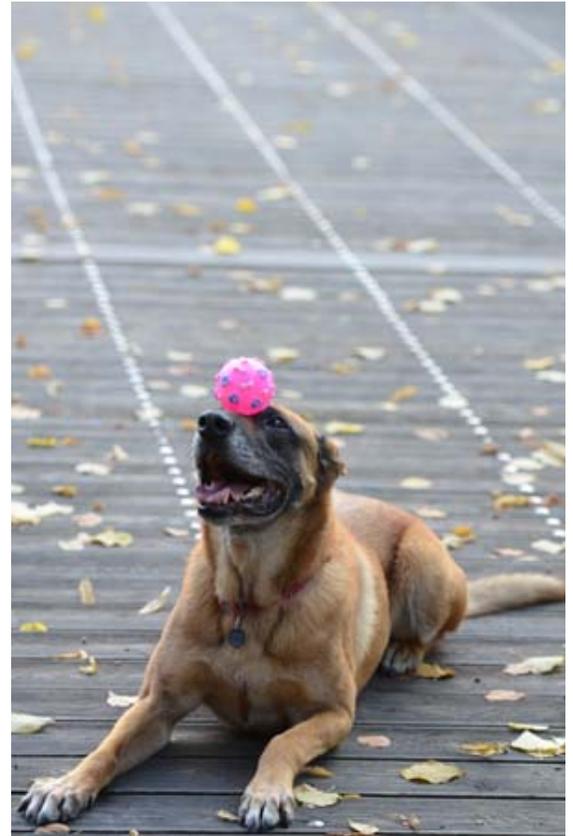
Like most adages, this one has a following of folks who truly believe that old dogs cannot be taught new things, but this is not the case. Old dogs can learn new tricks.

Dogs are innately good learners. They are naturally inquisitive and are eager to grasp new experiences. In fact, if a dog is awake, he is learning. They constantly observe their environment and respond to what they hear, see, and smell.

Even though young pups may be more actively curious, dogs never stop learning. In fact, adult dogs are often easier to train than their younger canine friends specifically because they *aren't* as active. Older dogs aren't as easily distracted as pups and can focus for longer periods of time. This ability to concentrate helps them learn new routines more easily.

Can my old dog learn *not* to do something?

Even though older dogs can readily learn, it's still best to start the learning process early on. In fact, puppies can begin formal training as soon as they go to their new homes, usually at weaning which occurs around 8 weeks of age. Older dogs are great students, but teaching a new pup does have one advantage: you are working with a clean slate. The pup is too young to have acquired bad habits that need to be "unlearned."



Older dogs, on the other hand, may have learned behaviors that their owners would prefer they hadn't. Older dogs with years spent absorbing their world often develop habitual responses to their environment. Perhaps they can't resist chewing the newspaper. People who choose to adopt an adult dog may find that the dog has a few peculiarities that they can accept and some that they want to change. Can that dog fetch the paper instead of demolishing it?

"It's never too late to adjust a dog's behavior."

Luckily, it's never too late to adjust a dog's behavior. Dogs live in the moment. They don't dwell on the past or worry about the future. If the new owner patiently directs the dog's behavior, even annoying old habits can be resolved. Adopted dogs are usually happy to have a loving home and are anxious to please their new owners. These mature dogs enjoy bonding with their owners while learning a few new tricks. Dogs that have been with a family since puppyhood also relish the time spent with their owners in novel activities, and learning is a fun activity for them.

My dog doesn't seem to be picking up some tricks – why is that?

Old and young dogs make eager students. The learning techniques are the same regardless of a dog's age, but some tweaks may be required. Frisky pups are energetic enough to perform physically demanding tricks for extended periods of time. Fetching a ball for 30 minutes? No problem! But older dogs with creaky joints may not be able to withstand the rigors of such a strenuous exercise.

Pet owners can teach their old dogs new tricks, but they must choose the right tricks. Even simple tricks can be uncomfortable for older dogs. Sitting repeatedly takes a toll on old hip joints. Begging for a treat strains an old back. Jumping up to catch a Frisbee just plain hurts! Consider your dog's physical status before asking him to perform any trick.

Here is a list of less strenuous tricks:

1. Speak
2. High five
3. Kiss
4. Shake
5. Walk backwards
6. Crawl (unless dropping to the floor is too uncomfortable)
7. Retrieve a leash, slippers, remote control
8. Put away toys
9. Cover up with a blanket
10. Push a ball (instead of fetch)

Another thing to consider when teaching an old dog new tricks: while older dogs are good learners, they may have more difficulty understanding your instructions. Many senior pets have vision and hearing deficits that make it more difficult for them to comprehend your directions. You can work around these obstacles that are part of the natural ageing process by modifying the way you communicate with your dog. If your dog has a hearing deficit, use hand signals. If his vision is diminished, stay in his direct line of sight and use louder verbal cues.

Tricks are Fun

Teaching and learning new tricks can be a fun pastime for you and your dog, no matter what your respective ages are. Time shared while learning new tricks will deepen the bond you already have with your canine friend. Plus, tricks provide mental stimulation for older dogs who may be suffering from dementia. Keeping the brain active is always a good thing. Just use your experiences and common sense to pick tricks that are on par with your dog's physical abilities. And rewrite that old adage....You **CAN** teach an old dog new tricks!

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Lynn Buzhardt, DVM

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