



Grafton Dog Obedience Club Inc.

BUT HE KNOWS HE'S DONE SOMETHING WRONG!

You arrive home after a hard day at work to find a large hole in the lawn which is your pride and joy. As you stand there, hands on hips (and steam gently wafting from your ears), Fido runs to greet you but just as he gets to you he slows down, slinks to the ground and turns his head away from you to avoid eye contact.

"Aha" you think to yourself "He knows he shouldn't have dug up the lawn, he's feeling really guilty". "You bad dog" you say through gritted teeth. Fido rolls over belly up at your feet. He may even wet himself. "Yep, he's guilty alright" you think.

Wrong. Fido probably dug up the lawn hours ago and has totally forgotten about that interesting beetle he saw disappear down a hole in the grass. So why did he act guilty?

Let's look at the whole thing from the dog's perspective.

Fido hears you come home. Joyfully he rushes to meet you – until he notices your body language that is. Dogs (like most animals) are masters at reading body language and it is soon very clear to him that you are really angry – your rigid posture and scowling expression are obvious give-aways. "Oops" thinks Fido, "the boss has obviously had a hard day at work today, I'd better let him know that I'm not about to upset him more than he is already, he's looking pretty defensive". So Fido slinks to the ground and turns his head away. In dog language Fido is saying "I'm not threatening you – you don't have to defend yourself against me".

But then your harsh voice growls "You bad dog" and Fido thinks, "Oh dear, he didn't understand my message – better make it even clearer and hope he understands this time". So Fido submissively rolls onto his back exposing his belly. In dog language this says, "Look, I've put myself in a very vulnerable position, I can't possibly threaten you".

The misunderstanding occurs because humans don't understand dogs anywhere near as well as most dogs understand humans. If you had stood looking at the hole in the lawn with a nice relaxed posture and smiling face, Fido would have given you his usual joyous greeting. Fido's submissive reaction had nothing to do with guilt or knowing right from wrong – he simply reacted to your body language and voice.

The same thing applies when you find your favourite shoes chewed up, that puddle on your favourite mat, the kitchen garbage bin raided or some other misdemeanour you feel Fido should have known was wrong. Sure you can train Fido to realise that your shoes are off limits, that he is only to pee on the grass outside and that garbage is off limits, but don't expect him to automatically KNOW right from wrong and to feel guilty when he does something wrong.

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