Guiding Eyes Graduate Call

Date: Wednesday, June 24, 2020

Topic: Reworking guide dogs after errors and how to approach and work around obstacles

Presenter: Andrea Martine, Guide Dog Mobility Instructor (GDMI) - Specialized Training Department, Guiding Eyes for the Blind

Moderator: Liz Bottner, Guiding Eyes Graduate Council President

Andrea Martine spoke tonight on the topic of reworking our dogs when errors occur as well as how to work up to and around obstacles. If the dog makes an error while working, what could cause that error and what is the appropriate handler response? Andrea relayed that many factors can cause errors. Sometimes it’s the dog that makes the error and sometimes it’s the handler.

Andrea further explained that part of a successful handler response to working errors is to remove negative emotion as much as possible. Working errors can be startling; however, being aware of the severity of the handler response will dictate how the dog responds. In the ideal world, the handler would take a breath and then rework the situation, giving the dog the choice to try again. In doing so, the handler is able to show the dog what was done incorrectly and allow the dog to make a correction on his/her own. If the dog responds correctly, verbal praise and food reward are then given. If the dog makes the same choice again which causes the error, it is then necessary to set the dog up and rework several times using the backchaining method (related to breaking the wanted behavior down into smaller behaviors, focusing on each smaller behavior until it is performed consistently and putting everything together to form the complete wanted behavior). Some dogs will respond quickly, while others will stress out and shut down, so sometimes it is best to decide as a handler if the error is a major t hing that needs to be focused on, or if it can be tolerated.

Andrea stated that sometimes, it might be that the handler might be aligned incorrectly or giving the dog cues that are different than what the handler is expecting the dog to do. It is good to have sighted help when possible to determine what went wrong. Family or friends are great resources for this. The school can also be consulted to help as well..

Graduate Questions:

Deborah Groeber asked about clarification related to the handler focusing on correcting too many small errors. When the dog corrects them, will giving too much praise cause the dog to make errors so they can receive a "praise party"? Deborah further explained that she will use the verbal cue of "watch it" if she noticed that her dog has made a small error.

Andrea said that using "watch it" works well for smaller errors and that giving the dog too much praise could distract the dog and possibly cause more errors. The key to it all is being consistent.

Mike Gravitt asked about how to overcome an error when the dog's error becomes an error on the part of the handler.

Andrea stated that after the error occurs, it is best to stop, take a moment to breathe and then deal with the error that the dog made. Many times, handler responses are more emotional and the dog does not make as big a deal of it.

Zerline asked about how to deal with a situation related to working a dog in addition to using a support cane and having a fear of an error occurring. She further mentioned the challenge of having both hands full (dog and support cane) and not being able to correct as quickly in that instance.

Andrea advised to back up and rework the problem and correct if needed, whether it be a harness check or any other correction you have been taught. If you cannot rework the problem, then drop the handle and praise your dog. Pay attention to the area if you can, knowing you may have a problem in that area. Andrea stressed the importance of being consistent and that the dog should correct itself with a little work and reward of working through the situation correctly.

Sheila commented that there is a fire hydrant at a corner of a route that she frequently travels and her dog always wants to sniff the fire hydrant. She asked how this behavior could be corrected.

Andrea suggested to heel to the curb and pat it out to signal to the dog that this is the behavior that is wanted. Take a couple of steps back and give the "forward" command. If the dog corrects the action, reward and praise it. Then go about four steps back and approach the curb again. If not, show the dog the curve again before trying to work to it again. Increase the distance from the curb with each successful approach to the curb where the dog ignores the fire hydrant. This technique is known as backchaining. Make the dog think that the food reward given at the curb is more important than the hydrant. This is where the food reward can really be handy. The dog will think it is better than the sniffing it is doing.

Drew asked about shrubs and overhead obstacles. He is having problems running into them and was wondering if there was an easier way to deal with them rather than having to rework them all of the time. A big part of his problem is that people don’t keep their shrubs cut back.

Andrea suggested that to treat the bushes like a landmark having the dog stop for them and then work around them. She also suggested to call the local municipality about getting people to trim their shrubs and overhanging branches.

Joy wanted to know something similar to what Drew was going through, especially with shrubs growing over the sidewalk and very low, overhanging branches.

Andrea suggested a similar answer to Drew as well as targeting the bushes and backchaining. After successfully backchaining and targeting, get the dog to go forward, stop and then work around the obstacle, giving it lots of praise and rewarding with food.

Wendy David made the comment that since she lives in the middle of the city, she tends to pick her battles when it comes to shrubbery.

Andrea agreed and even suggested shorelining as well. Since there were so many shrubs in the city, if you corrected for each one, the dog and handler would get very confused and here again consistency is encouraged.

Dee shared that her dog is so in tuned with her that she stops for shadows of branches while she is walking and shared that she tells her dog to "watch out" for the overheads.

Andrea thought it was fantastic that she and her dog were so well in tuned with each other.

Andrea Connor asked if she told her dog to watch out for the overhead and it ran her into it anyway if reworking the situation would let the dog forgive itself especially if it did it correctly.

Andrea Martine stated that this would let the dog forgive itself, especially if it did it correctly.

Barbara: If there are trucks parked over the sidewalk, is it okay to have the dog work around them into the street and then get back up on the sidewalk around them? She further explained that she has had problems with her dog stopping short for the trucks.

Andrea said that stopping short was common and setting her dog up in the house by playing games with it by heeling to the obstacle she had set up and then backchain and target rewarding her dog for taking her to it. She also said that if there was no other way around the trucks, then it was fine to have her dog take her to the sidewalk, show her the curb and then step off of the curb into the street, working around the obstacle and lastly step back up onto the sidewalk to continue along the original line of travel.