

## That 'Guilty Look' Isn't What You Think – Here's Why

Get into the habit of telling your dog off for doing this, and you may simply be confusing them and damaging your relationship with your furry friend. It's against their natural inclinations and may actually cause them to do more of the things you're trying to get them to stop.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dog shaming videos and photos posted on social media, depicting a dog being called out for a certain bad behavior are as popular as ever since the trend started several years ago
- While some say it can damage a dog's dignity and self-esteem, most pet experts agree that the "guilty" looks dogs often get when they're being recognized for a bad deed may be more about their reaction to the reaction of their human
- One expert believes that when owners get into the habit of scolding, it may simply confuse the dogs, who are smart enough to know which responses to assume to diffuse the situation
- To develop a strong bond with your dog and get him to trust you, fairness and consistency is key; part of fairness is owning up to your own responsibility in regard to something your dog did that may have prompted him to behave badly
- Whether it's jumping on people, digging or peeing in the wrong place, there are behaviors on your part, namely consistency and fairness, that go further to help alleviate the situation as opposed to escalating it

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You've seen them — the sorrow-filled eyes and droopy countenance of dogs all across social media whose humans confronted them with questions after finding bits (or bucketsful) of chair stuffing, once-potted dirt or torn newspapers strewn through an entire room, and sometimes the whole house. Some humans will see such posts and think "for shame" on the people who think it's funny to publicize the bad behavior of the poor pups who've just gone and done what dogs do.

Case in point: an incident posted on YouTube by a guy named Mali Vujanic, who titled the clip "Guilty!"<sup>1</sup> As you can view above, it involved two dogs wearing contrasting looks on their faces that ostensibly told the sad story, especially since they stood in the vicinity of an empty bag of cat treats. One certainly looked guilty, says a writer for The Atlantic:

*"The first dog, a golden retriever, lounged calmly, her conscience seemingly clean. But the second dog, a yellow Labrador named Denver, sat quaking in a corner, her eyes downcast, making what Vujanic called 'her signature 'I done it' face.' Vujanic gasped at the apparent admission of guilt: 'You did this!' Denver beat her tail nervously and grimaced. 'You know the routine. In the kennel.' Obediently, the dog impounded herself."*<sup>2</sup>

Macy, the first dog, seemed to have no qualms about being confronted, although he doesn't opt for eye contact. One gathers in no uncertain terms that the second pup, Denver, had "guilt" written all over him and clearly felt remorse. The whole clip with the sad (but hilariously appropriate) music is almost painful to witness.

Everything in Denver's demeanor pled for mercy, understanding and profound sorrow at his weakness. The more times Vujanic asked "Did you do this?" the lower Denver's poor head hung. But when asked to look up and face the music, Denver seemed to actually be hiding a cheesy grin. All bravado, though.

## **Pet Shaming — A Social Media Phenomenon**

Posted in 2011, Vujanic's video, which as of this writing has garnered 51 million views, is touted as the forerunner in the ongoing "pet shaming" craze. Guilty dogs are either caught in the act or compelled to 'fess up to some kind of no-no, called out and the incident shared on social media. Usually it's a photo of a troubled-looking (or adorably cavalier) dog with a sign around his neck describing his crime.

One with a tiny white cap on his head stands shame-faced next to a poster announcing, "I chew toilet bolt caps. Now I wear a hat of shame." Another reads "I have been a good dog for [two] days. Oops." The two is crossed out and beside the dog is an empty donut box. Tangible evidence of **dogs' bad behavior** includes heel-less shoes, shredded rolls of paper towel, broken dishes and sometimes, in the background, complete mayhem. Dogs are called "jerks" and "adorable monsters."

It's such a popular pastime that a book of dog shaming photos published in 2013 made the New York Times best-seller list.<sup>3</sup> The majority are posted to be funny, and many are, but there are those who are convinced that **dog shaming** is tantamount to cruelty. It undermines a dog's dignity and encourages mockery of animals, they say.

Fortunately, there weren't as many "How could you shame that poor dog that way?" comments under Vujanic's video as might be expected. It does make one wonder, though — Did Denver actually realize he'd done something he shouldn't have?

## **The Myth of Canine Guilt and Remorse**

Alexandra Horowitz, who runs the Horowitz Dog Cognition Lab<sup>4</sup> at Barnard College in New York City, says the look that appears on a dog's face, especially in light of a "crime" that's been committed, is not really embarrassment or regret. She cites a 2009 experiment in which owners were asked to tell their dogs not to eat a tempting treat. The owners were then directed to leave the room. Then:

*"She either removed the treat or fed it to the dog. When the owners returned, they were told — regardless of the truth — that their dog either had or had not eaten it. If owners thought their dogs had indulged, reprimands followed, and guilty looks abounded. Yet dogs who hadn't eaten the treat were more likely to appear guilty than dogs who had — so long as their owners lashed out."*<sup>5</sup>

Another group who wrote a paper on the topic in 2012 noted that rather than remorse humans think they see, it's more likely a "submissive response that has proved advantageous because it reduces conflict between dog and human."<sup>6</sup>

The Atlantic refers to an ancient pre-Islamic religion in Persia and India known as Zoroastrianism, and its text, called the Avesta,<sup>7</sup> which revered and even deified dogs, but had specified punishments for dogs that had committed “willful” crimes, such as biting without barking, whether people or sheep.

Courts in medieval Europe didn’t differentiate much between dogs and people who committed crimes. Dogs were often summoned to court, handed sentences of jail time, floggings or death just as humans were. It’s clear the culture of the time assumed “bad” dogs were aware of their unacceptable behavior, but did it anyway.

Doctoral student Julie Hecht, who studies animal behavior in New York City, believes that when owners get into the habit of scolding, it may simply confuse the dogs, who are smart enough to know which responses get them the least hassle.

In essence, the more dogs are chastised, the more they end up doing the things that got them into trouble. The “submissive response” dogs assume may be part of an “anxious cycle of destruction and appeasement,” she says, which ultimately breaks the animal’s trust in their human.

## **The Simple Solution to (at Least Some) Canine Misbehavior**

What some people observed after viewing Vujanic’s shaming video is that it was pretty clearly Denver’s owner who left the cat treats out to begin with that caused the problem. Just like humans who want to have a healthy diet know very well they shouldn’t go after the chips or cookies they know are in the cupboard, but do anyway, making dogs responsible for restraint is not only unrealistic, it may even be cruel.

It’s one thing to teach dogs obedience, which may eventually save not only your life but theirs, but as some wise person once observed, it’s often not the dog who needs training as much as the human. If you want to develop a strong bond with your dog and get him to trust you, fairness and consistency is key. Part of fairness is owning up to your own responsibility. For example, it’s just plain silly to be mad at a dog for pooping in your bedroom if you haven’t made provision for him to go out in a timely manner.

Similarly, it only makes sense to keep your shoes behind closed doors if there’s a chance your dog might be tempted. Don’t leave the package of paper towels sitting on the floor next to the utility closet — put it on the shelf and close the door. Food — yours, theirs and the cat’s — should be placed where it can’t be reached, as should plants, cell phones and electrical cords you don’t want chewed up.

## **A Better Solution — Understand Dog (and Cat) Behavior and Work with It**

As Life Hacker observes, we want our pets to be well-behaved, but they’re still “wild at heart.” Expecting them (or forcing them) to adhere to a new set of ground rules that were designed for humans is against their natural inclinations. Chewing, for instance, is just what dogs — and certainly puppies — do.

One reason why dogs chew may have something to do with strengthening their jaws and teeth. It could be a dental or a medical condition involving his stomach or a compulsive behavior, issues that need to be addressed by a veterinarian. But if you suspect your dog is chewing things because he’s simply bored, something needs to change — on your part, not the dog’s.

“Bad” chewing, also known as “destructive chewing,” involves valuable items being ruined. Keep in mind that to an untrained dog, there’s no difference between the chew toy you gave him and the base of your grandmother’s antique plant stand. You’ll notice, though, that this occurs most often when your dog’s either home alone or unsupervised. Life Hacker advises:

*“Don’t just let it happen. Sometimes chewing is dangerous for pets (cords, toxic plants), so it’s important to address it and put a stop to it. Some say taste deterrents aren’t a good idea, but the ASPCA doesn’t object to deterrents that are specifically designed for that purpose. But always be careful about what you’re allowing your pet to ingest.*

*Do not give toys that resemble inappropriate items; for example do not give your dog an old shoe to chew on because he will not know the difference between the old chew shoe and a brand new pair. If your pet chews for play, make sure to engage in playtime with them.”<sup>8</sup>*

## How to Handle ‘Bad’ Behavior in Dogs

“Bad” dog behavior that’s difficult to deal with and may seem downright insufferable at times is when your stuff gets destroyed. Life Hacker notes, “I’ve found that learning to live comfortably with (pets) comes down to two basic factors: understanding their behavior and working with it.” Here are other dog issues (whether they’re sorry or not sorry) and possible solutions:

- **Shedding everywhere** — Needless to say, if your dog leaves more dog hair around the house than you think is warranted, remember: They’re hairy, and the amount of shedding isn’t something they can control, but you can. Twice a year or so they need to get rid of it. Almost any pet site will tell you how often your particular dog (or cat) breed needs to be brushed. Often, it’s twice a week.

Grooming tools and natural pet shampoos loosen the undercoat and “self-grooming” brushes your pet can rub up against can help with the problem. A rubber squeegee to run over your furniture and carpets before vacuuming can make house cleaning easier. Establishing a routine for cleaning will, too, as will a species-appropriate diet. If you can’t deal with hair, next time do your research and adopt a breed that sheds less.

- **Peeing on stuff** — The first order of business if this problem occurs is to find out if it’s a medical issue. After that you can talk to your veterinarian about triggers, such as strangers, other dogs (or cats) or even the smell of such on your clothes. Here’s what not to do:

*“Most experts agree, yelling or ‘shoving their nose in it’ is a terrible solution. It just makes your pet afraid of you, and they don’t learn that their behavior is wrong, only to fear you.”<sup>9</sup>*

Revisit the basics of positive potty training if your dog is having accidents you know are not a medical problem.

- **Jumping on you** — Ostensibly, when dogs jump up on people, it’s because they want to get on the same level with them to say hello. Laughing, engaging enthusiastically or speaking sharply only reinforces the behavior; even dog lovers find this habit more annoying (and maybe even frightening) than you know.

Ignoring it won’t cure it, either. A better way: Teach your dog to sit when greeting people will earn him instant kudos, head scratches and treats, which is so much better than using your knee to fend him off. If the jumping persists, turn your back immediately and ignore him.

# Dogs Become 'Empaths' When They Hear 'That Tone' in Your Voice

Business Insider<sup>10</sup> succinctly describes an empath, a relatively new term spawned by writers of science fiction, as someone who is uncommonly receptive to the emotions of others. Empaths can't help it that they're "emotional sponges," absorbing the heightened angst, elation, anger or anguish in others.

What's interesting is that people who feel the strongest emotional connection to their dogs say their dog senses when they feel blue or even anxious; something in the human's body language and tone of voice may be the alert.

It's probably not a stretch to say most dogs are automatic empaths. They seem "in tune" with their owners' moods. Quoted by The Telegraph, a professor in the U.K., Peter Neville of the Centre of Applied Pet Ethology, explains his idea of what might really be going on when people express surprise, anger or even amusement while focusing their attention on their dogs, who respond with what the human interprets as an "I did it and I'm so humiliated" look:

*"Such confrontation, while intended as a spot of fun for owners, can simply be unkind because the dog cannot experience or empathize with these emotions in their owners and simply feels threatened by their negative attention at such times."<sup>11</sup>*

Dogs can learn from good behavior and bad behavior. It all depends on how you, the most favorite person your dog knows, handle both behaviors. Both your stance and the tone of your voice are tools you can use to make situations "teaching moments." Just be sure to time your measured reactions as closely to the time the behavior occurred as possible so they're able to grasp the connection. That's the best way to reinforce the good and discourage the bad.

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [YouTube, Denver the Guilty Dog, March 9, 2011](#)

<sup>2, 5, 6</sup> [The Atlantic March 2018](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Amazon.com Dog Shaming Pascale Lemire September 4, 2013](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Dog Cognition Lab](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Avesta – Zoroastrian Archives](#)

<sup>8, 9</sup> [Life Hacker October 2, 2020](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Business Insider January 17, 2018](#)

<sup>11</sup> [The Telegraph November 5, 2013](#)

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