Chewed slippers. Scratched furniture. Shredded curtains. All potential evidence that your dog or cat is guilty of a crime. Is their doleful look an indication of guilt? Do they realize they did something wrong? Or could their ‘guilty look’ be a reaction to your emotional response upon learning of the crime?

Do pets understand right from wrong?

Living harmoniously within a social group generally involves adherence to some rules. Animals learn rules by observing and following other group members—feral dogs can be seen following members of their group that are elderly and presumably wise. Behavioral rules are also learned through trial and error. Behaviors that bring positive results are repeated. Behaviors that are not productive or yield unpleasant consequences are not repeated. What is considered ‘right’ in one household might be ‘wrong’ in another. When you bring a new pet into your home, it joins your household with no innate knowledge of your social rules. From the start, your pet will begin to make behavioral choices based on its individual needs and will naturally seek opportunities to satisfy basic goals. Your pet will seek food, water, play objects, and a comfortable place to rest but will not know that some food, objects, or furniture are meant just for the people. Over time, through training, your pet can learn which behaviors you prefer, the ‘right’ behaviors, and which you do not prefer, the ‘wrong’ ones. When your pet selects a behavior you consider wrong, the training in that context is likely incomplete. For instance, you may have taught your pet not to scratch objects when you are not in the room, but you may not have followed through with teaching your pet that scratching is not an option, even in your absence. When your pet chooses a behavior that breaks house rules, such as stealing forbidden food, then at that moment, your pet does not likely ponder whether the behavior is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. In your pet’s mind, the action will bring immediate reward. In fact, by the time you discover the missing food, your pet will not even recall making the decision.

Can I teach my pet which behaviors are right and wrong in my home?

The first step is to use good management to prevent your pet from engaging in self-rewarding behaviors that you do not favor. Every time your pet engages in a self-rewarding behavior, such as climbing onto a soft chair or urinating on an absorbent carpet, it will be slightly more motivated to do the behavior again. The behavior will become more valuable over time. It is much easier to use management to prevent the behavior from occurring than attempting to STOP the behavior once it has become somewhat of a habit. Management includes keeping things tidy—putting food and tempting objects out of reach. Gates can be used to keep your pet in a pet-proofed area. When your pet does wander around the house, be sure to supervise. Direct supervision allows you to intervene promptly—before your pet reaches for an object or begins to squat to eliminate on your rug. When you notice your pet approaching that tempting object or location, calmly interrupt them. You can shake a treat bag or squeak a toy, or happily call them to you. Always give a reward for their attention. Provide an appropriate outlet to reward the ‘right’ choice further. Guide your pet to a toy or an appropriate bathroom area. Over time, you can further clarify the rules for your pet. For instance, if your pet tends to steal food from the table, you can teach your pet to always lie down on a mat while people eat. You can purposely place a tempting pair of shoes on the floor and leave a new toy close by to reward your dog for leaving the shoes. Place a scratching post near a chair that your cat inappropriately scratches. There are many possible examples. A professional trainer who understands the value of using positive reinforcement can help you teach your pet the important rules for your household.

Shouldn’t I scold my pet when I discover an infraction has been made?

It is never appropriate to reprimand your pet for an infraction already committed, whether the crime occurred 10 hours earlier or just 10 seconds. First, punishment is ineffective unless it occurs within a few seconds of the behavior. More importantly, even a verbal reprimand can trigger a fear response which can seriously damage your relationship with your pet. Finally, because of the delay, this ‘after the fact’ punishment will not change your pet’s motivation to do the behavior in the future. Being scolded in the presence of the evidence will only teach your pet to be afraid in the presence of the evidence. For example, say your pet has defecated on the floor. You return to find a pile of stool. Your pet comes to greet you, and you scold him. The next day, your pet again defecates on the floor. Suddenly, there is a pile of feces on the floor! Now, your pet will see the stool and experience fear, knowing you will be angry when you see the pile. Your pet will not understand that he should not have deposited in the first place. Nevertheless, he may have a look of appeasement, a ‘guilty‘ look when you enter the room with feces.

What exactly is a guilty look, and why does it occur?

Head down. Eyes averted. Shoulders hunched. Tail thumping the floor. Body retreating. Your pet looks guilty, maybe even apologetic, right? WRONG! Your pet’s body posture and attitude do not indicate guilt or remorse but represent a response to your body posture and attitude. When you discover your favorite slippers have been destroyed or your new sofa has been scratched, you naturally respond with a scowl, a sigh, or maybe even a shriek. Your dog or cat immediately responds with a posture that you interpret as guilt, but instead, the posture that you are observing is an appeasement or submissive posture and does not reflect the emotion of guilt.

Appeasement postures are used to communicate a desire to avoid a confrontation. This posture suggests that your pet is uncomfortable with your communication, perhaps you do not appear your usual friendly self, and whether you are sad, angry, or frustrated, your pet recognizes there is a problem and is trying to avoid escalation at all costs. Submissive and appeasement postures are nearly universally recognized by social animals and are routinely used to prevent physical conflict. Humans notice these signals and are apt to feel compassion for an animal that has demonstrated postures misinterpreted as ‘remorse’.

Are guilty looks significant?

Guilty looks signify the pet’s fear, concern, or anxiety in response to a potential confrontation. Research suggests that dogs with a guilty look do not show evidence that they are aware of having engaged in misbehavior. One would not experience guilt if one were unaware that a crime had been committed. The look your pet gives you when it is reprimanded does not represent guilt but is just your pet’s effort at communicating concern about a potential confrontation. Submissive dogs lower their heads, hunch down, and avert their eyes when trying to diffuse a situation or appease their owners. In multi-dog households, the guilty-looking dog may be the innocent pooch. For example, if two dogs are home and Dog A chews the newspaper, Dog B may look guilty because he is the peacemaker of the pair.

Guilty or not guilty—should we care?

Do not think the inability to feel guilt will result in an untrainable pet. Our pets can and do learn to understand family rules. Consistent communication of important rules along with reward-based training reduces the chances of social infractions. If your pet consistently exhibits undesirable behaviors, do not hesitate to consult with a behavior professional. Be assured that pets do not have to feel guilty to be well-behaved! We have lots of feelings for our pets. Let’s leave out the guilt and focus on love and affection!