


The 4 Questions Every Dog Guardian Should Ask Before Training

Understanding Before Strategies:
A Science-Based Approach to Dog Behavior



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Why These Questions Matter

If you're reading this guide, chances are you're frustrated. Maybe your dog's reactivity isn't getting better despite training. Maybe the anxiety persists even after months of 'positive reinforcement.' Maybe you've hired trainers, watched videos, and tried all the techniques—but the problems keep coming back. Here's what most people don't realize: behavior problems often aren't training problems at all.

Traditional dog training focuses on teaching your dog what to do: sit, stay, heel, leave it. But when your dog is reactive, anxious, or struggling with 'behavior problems,' the real question isn't what they should do differently—it's why they're behaving this way in the first place.

This guide will walk you through four essential questions that will help you shift from reactive problem-solving to true understanding—the kind of understanding that creates lasting change instead of temporary fixes.

Important: These aren't questions for your trainer to answer—they're questions for you to explore about your dog. Understanding comes first. Strategies come second.

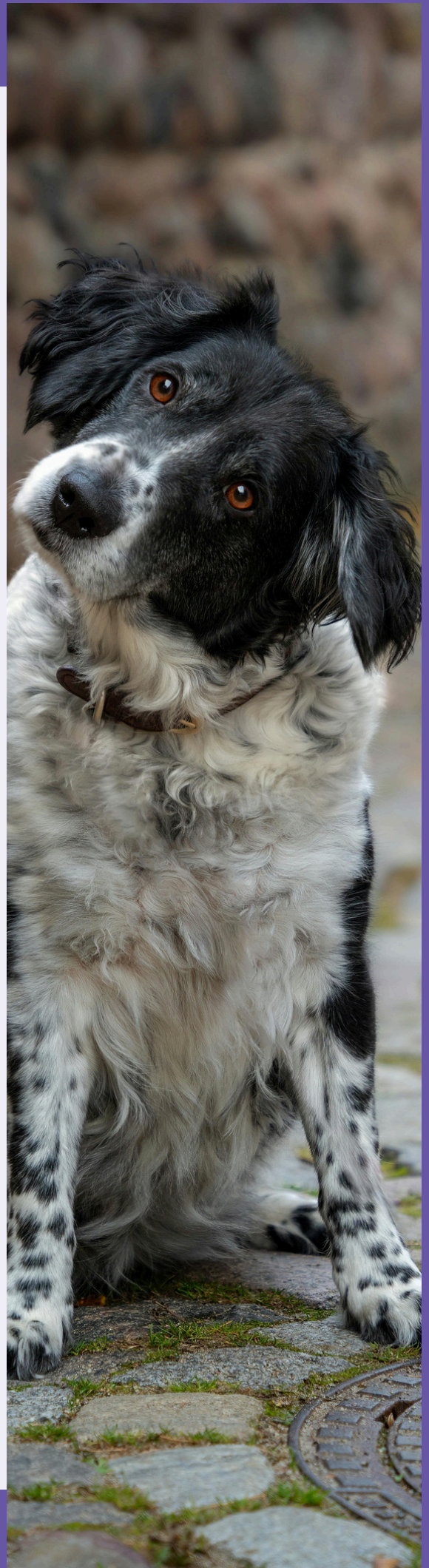
Question 1: What Has My Dog Learned?

Understanding the 'L' in L.E.G.S.: Learning History

Every experience your dog has ever had shapes how they see and respond to the world today. This includes:

- Early socialization experiences (or lack thereof) during the critical 8-16 week puppy period
- Traumatic events: attacks, accidents, scary encounters, abandonment
- Previous training methods and how your dog responded to them
- What behaviors have been rewarded (intentionally or accidentally)
- Time spent in shelters, rescues, multiple homes, or isolation

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Why This Matters

A dog who missed crucial early socialization isn't 'stubborn'—they literally never learned that people, dogs, or new environments are safe. A dog who was punished for growling didn't learn to 'be good'—they learned to skip warning signals and go straight to biting.

You can't 'train out' learning history. But when you understand what your dog has learned, you can make informed decisions about management, environment, and gradual exposure that actually help them feel safer.

Questions to Ask Yourself

- What do I know about my dog's first 16 weeks of life?
- Has my dog experienced trauma, abandonment, or significant life changes?
- What training methods have been used with my dog before I got them?
- What behaviors have I accidentally rewarded?
- When did the current problem behavior start, and what was happening in their life at that time?



Question 2: What World Is My Dog Living In?

Understanding the 'E' in L.E.G.S.: Environment

Modern pet life is deeply unnatural for dogs. They evolved to roam territories, make choices, and engage in species-specific behaviors—not to sit inside apartments waiting for scheduled bathroom breaks. Environmental factors that profoundly impact behavior include:

- Physical space: apartment vs. house, yard access, urban vs. rural setting
- Daily routine: how much time alone, exercise type and duration, mental stimulation
- Social environment: other pets, children, visitors, household stress levels
- Sensory environment: noise levels, visual stimulation, crowding, unpredictability
- Recent changes: moves, new family members, schedule disruptions, losses



Why This Matters

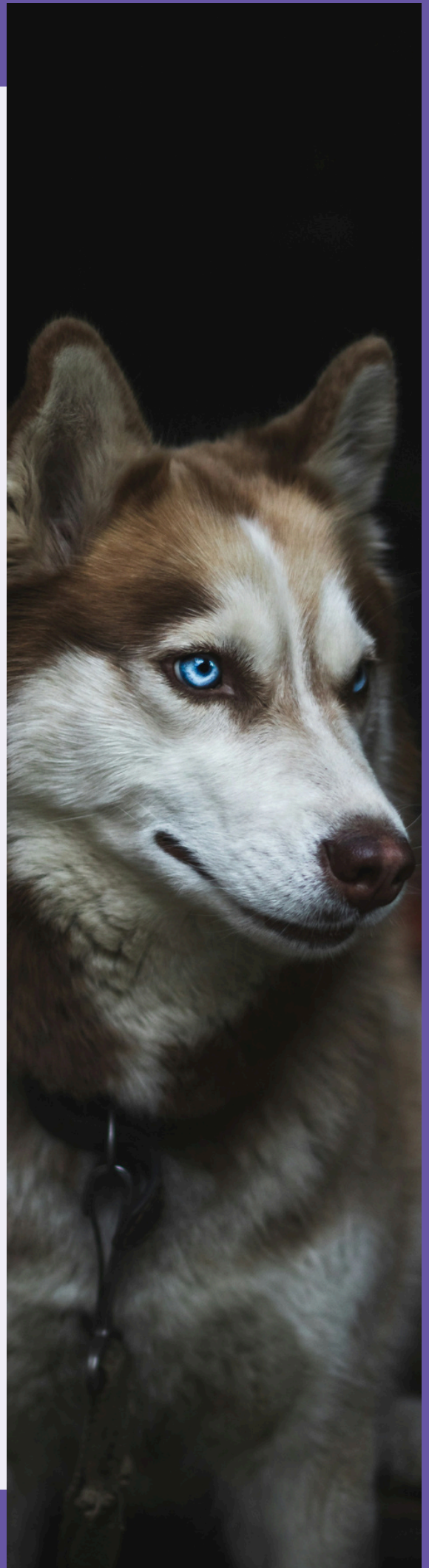
A dog who destroys furniture isn't 'bad'—they might be understimulated and desperately need more appropriate outlets for natural behaviors. A dog who's suddenly aggressive toward other pets isn't 'jealous'—they might be stressed by household changes and feel their resources are threatened.

Sometimes, the most effective 'training' is actually environmental management: changing what, when, and how things happen in your dog's daily world.

Questions to Ask Yourself

- How much choice does my dog have in their daily life?
- Is my dog getting appropriate physical AND mental exercise?
- What environmental stressors exist in our home? (loud noises, unpredictability, conflict)
- Has anything changed recently in our household or routine?
- Does my dog's environment match their breed needs? (herding dogs with nothing to herd, terriers with nothing to hunt, etc.)

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Question 3: What Was My Dog Designed to Do?

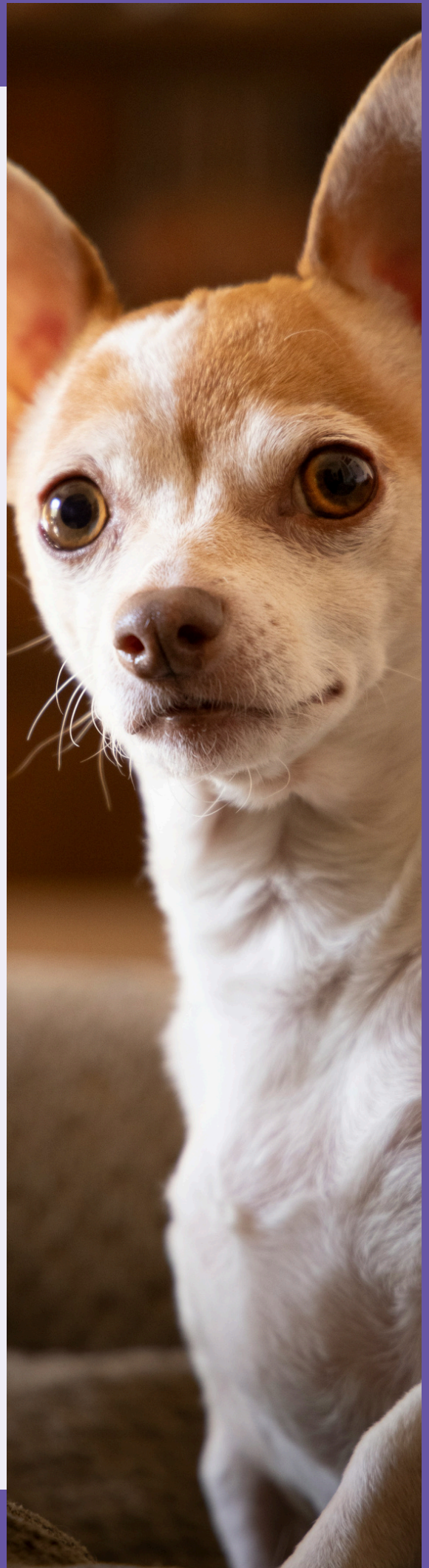
Understanding the 'G' in L.E.G.S.: Genetics

Your dog's breed heritage isn't just about appearance—it's a powerful blueprint for behavior. Breeds were created to perform specific jobs, and those instincts don't disappear just because your dog lives in a suburban home instead of a farm.

Breed-typical behaviors include:

- Herding breeds: eye contact, stalking, nipping at moving things
- Terriers: digging, high prey drive, barking, intense focus on small animals
- Scent Hounds: following scents obsessively, baying, independent decision-making
- Guardian breeds: wariness of strangers, territorial behavior, independent thinking
- Gun dogs: intense desire to retrieve, sensitivity to handler, constant motion
- Natural dogs: high independence, escape artistry, vocal communication

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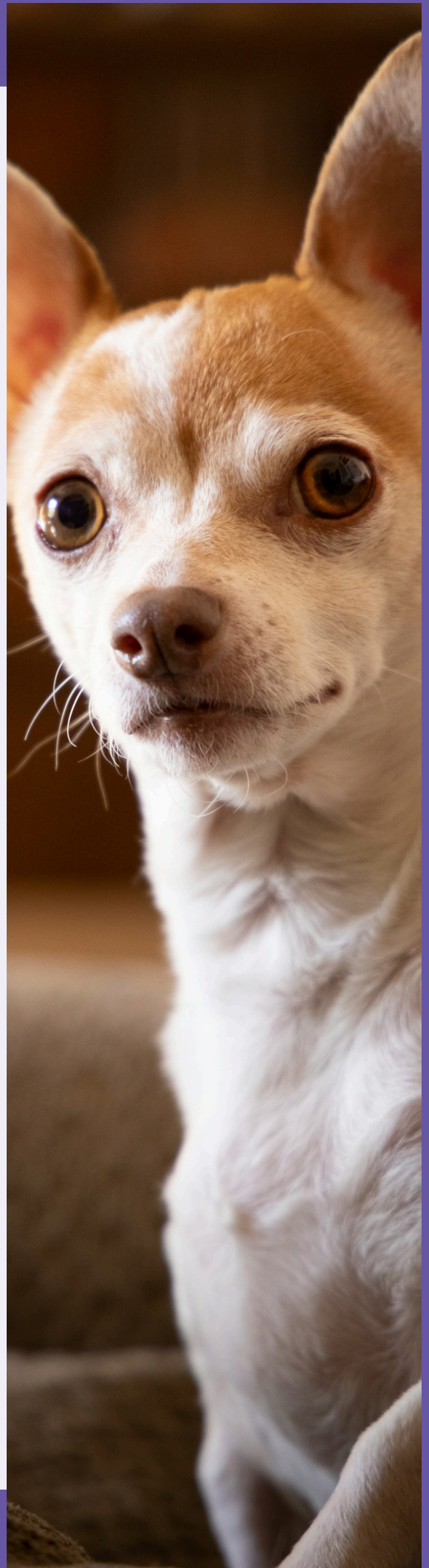
Why This Matters

A Border Collie who nips at running children isn't 'aggressive'—they're doing what they were bred to do: herd moving things. A Beagle who doesn't come when called isn't 'stubborn'—they're following their nose exactly as designed. A German Shepherd who's suspicious of strangers isn't 'antisocial'—they're guarding their family.

You can't train away genetics. But when you understand your dog's breed drives, you can channel them appropriately instead of fighting against them.

Questions to Ask Yourself

- What was my dog's breed (or mix) originally developed to do?
- Which breed-typical behaviors do I see in my dog's 'problem' behaviors?
- Am I trying to suppress natural behaviors instead of redirecting them?
- Does my dog have appropriate outlets for their breed-specific drives?
- Are my expectations realistic for this particular breed?



Question 4: Who Is My Dog as an Individual?

Understanding the 'S' in L.E.G.S.: Self

Beyond learning, environment, and genetics, every dog is a unique individual with their own personality, health status, and emotional state. Two dogs of the same breed with similar histories can respond completely differently to the same situation.

Individual factors affecting behavior:

- Health issues: pain, digestive problems, allergies, thyroid imbalances, neurological conditions
- Age and life stage: puppy energy, adolescent impulsivity, senior limitations
- Personality temperament: confident vs. cautious, social vs. independent, sensitive vs. resilient
- Current emotional state: stress levels, fear, anxiety, frustration, contentment
- Sensory sensitivities: sound sensitivity, touch sensitivity, visual processing differences



Why This Matters

A dog who's suddenly reactive might be in pain. A dog who seems 'stubborn' might actually be confused or anxious. A confident puppy might become a cautious adult—that's normal development, not a training failure.

Generic training programs fail because they don't account for individual differences. What works for a confident Golden Retriever might terrify an anxious rescue. What motivates a food-driven Labrador might not interest an independent Husky.

Questions to Ask Yourself

- Could my dog be in pain or discomfort? When was their last thorough vet exam?
- How would I describe my dog's personality in three words?
- What is my dog's current overall stress level?
- What makes my dog happiest? What do they find most stressful?
- Are my expectations appropriate for MY dog's individual capabilities and temperament?

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Putting It All Together

Here's the truth that most trainers won't tell you: complex behaviors like reactivity, anxiety, and aggression rarely have simple solutions. They're not problems to 'fix'—they're communication that makes perfect sense once you understand your dog's complete picture.

When you can answer these four questions about your dog—what they've learned, what world they're living in, what they were designed to do, and who they are as an individual—you stop guessing and start understanding.

And that's when real change becomes possible.


What Understanding Actually Looks Like

Instead of: 'My dog is aggressive toward other dogs.'
You understand: 'My rescue dog missed early socialization (Learning), lives in a busy urban environment with constant dog encounters (Environment), has herding breed genetics that make them reactive to movement (Genetics), and is naturally cautious and sensitive (Self). Their barking is fear-based communication, not aggression.'

Instead of: 'My dog won't listen to me.'

You understand: 'My dog was bred to make independent decisions while hunting (Genetics), had minimal training in their previous home (Learning), is highly motivated by scents in our wooded neighborhood (Environment), and has a strong, confident personality (Self). I need to work WITH their natural drives, not against them.'

The Magic of Understanding: When you see the complete picture, the 'how' strategies become obvious. You stop fighting your dog and start working together.



Ready to Understand Your Dog?

If these questions have resonated with you—if you're tired of temporary fixes and ready for real understanding—I can help.

As a certified Family Dog Mediator and Good Dog Academy Professional Dog Trainer, I use the L.E.G.S. + Total Welfare Framework and my Four Pillar Approach to help you see your dog's complete picture. Not so I can 'fix' them, but so you can understand them—and make decisions that actually work for your specific dog.

What a Behavior Assessment Looks Like

During our comprehensive assessment, we'll explore:

- Your dog's complete learning history and how it shapes current behavior
- Environmental factors that may be creating or maintaining problems
- Breed-specific behaviors and how to work with them, not against them
- Your dog's individual personality, health factors, and emotional needs

You'll receive a detailed written report explaining the 'why' behind your dog's behaviors and specific, science-based management strategies tailored to YOUR dog's unique situation.



No quick fixes. No false promises. Just honest, compassionate guidance grounded in animal welfare science and evidence-based practices.

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BOOK THE BEHAVIORAL
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