

Behavioral Problems

Dogs and people have lived together for thousands of years but that doesn't mean we always understand each other. Living with pets can sometimes be as frustrating and confusing as living with other people!

Dogs are **PACK ANIMALS**. They are social and like to interact with people and other dogs. Your dog will do what you want it to do if it earns him praise or petting and he considers you to be the leader of his pack. All dog packs have a leader dog that makes decisions for the rest of the group. Other dogs are subordinate to the leader. Your dog should never think he is the leader in your house. You are the one who should decide when to eat, when to go out, etc. As with children, dogs that have rules to follow and respect for their parents are well behaved. Many behavior problems are a direct result of a lack of leadership on the part of the owner.

Dogs behave as they prefer knowing that you are in charge, and often seem much happier when they understand that you have taken charge. Following the advice below may be harder on you than on your dog! It's lonely at the top, so give your dog a break and take over. He'll love you just as much.

Keep in mind that dogs are very sensitive to body language and visual cues. Behaviors that you don't think much about may have meaning to your dog in a way that may not be what you intended to say! For instance, two people talking face to face are confrontational in a dog's body language. Standing side by side is not. You can learn to take advantage of nonverbal clues to your dog.

The following suggestions are an effective and humane way to let your dog know that it is safe, well loved, and not the leader of the pack. Keep in mind that love is not related to social status and that most dogs live in relaxed harmony when the social hierarchy is clear, no matter where they stand in it.

It's not good to cater to your dog. Your dog's behavior should drive your decisions on how to treat it. If your dog has always been a perfect gentleman, you may not need to change a thing you are doing. But if your dog gives you problems, follow these suggestions.

If it bites you, totally ignore it for two days to notify it there's been a change in the household. Don't speak to it or look at it, even when feeding or letting it out. Then follow this program to the letter for at least a month before giving any slack. Applying "social distance" when your pet is misbehaving and rewarding with praise and attention only when it is good is the key to good behavior. Reward the behavior you want to see continued!

TRAINING STRATEGIES

Petting:

Keep it brief and pet only for obedience. Reward obeying commands with attention. If your dog demands petting, either looks away (fold arms, turn head up & away from the dog) or asks for a sit or down and then pet when it obeys. If you want to pet your dog, call it to you, don't go to it.

Practice "Look Always":

Don't let your dog demand play, food, or petting. **IF** your dog gets pushy, simply cross your arms, turn your head upward and to the side away from the dog. If your dog counters by moving to your other side, turn your head the other way. This is good practice to do any time your dog approaches you if he is very dominant and pushy. It is especially important if your dog has been aggressive towards you.

Teach "Lie Down & Stay."

A good solid down & stay is one of the best learning tools. It teaches your dog to be patient and to wait for Your command. You can practice while watching TV. Start with one-second stays for the first few days, and work up to longer and longer ones. After three weeks, most dogs can handle a half-hour down stay during a quiet time

of the day. Correct breaks with a body block or a downward leash correction—not by simply repeating “down” & “stay” over and over again. If your dog gets up 25 times, then correct it 25 times with the same actions and tone of voice. Do not include anger in your correction. **BE FIRM!**

“Wait At The Door”:

The pack leader has priority meaning they get to push out the door first to get something they want. This is why a lot of dogfights occur at doorways over who gets to go out first. Control the space in front of the dog and you control the dog. Use body blocks or head toward a door or doorway and then suddenly turn and go the other way if your dog tries to get ahead of you. This puts you back in the lead. Praise and pet your dog when it starts to turn around after you and keep moving until it reaches you. Practice this as you move around the house until your dog is content to stay behind you and follow your lead.

“Four On The Floor.”

Dogs interpret an increase in height as an increase in status. Dogs who sleep up on the bed are especially impressed with themselves. Keep dominant dogs on the floor, not up on the chairs, couches, or bed. If you want to cuddle, get down on the floor, ask for obedience, and then pet when your dog complies.

Teach “Heel” Leaders are in the lead:

Teach your dog to stay at your side while you initiate pace and direction.

This basic obedience program should make treating any other behavioral problems easier. A dog that looks to you for direction can be taught almost anything. It will be happy to work for what it wants and it helps keep its mind occupied constructively. Integrate this training into your day by asking your pet to perform some action whenever it wants to go outside, be fed, play ball, etc. Letting you be in charge will soon become second nature to the dog.

Most problem dog behaviors are **NORMAL** dog behaviors that are simply unacceptable to the humans they live with. Redirecting and retraining can make our canine companions better and happier pets.

A few more tips:

Do your homework! There are plenty of good books available to assist you in training your dog. Be cautious, as there are many philosophies of how to train a dog. Outdated or cruel methods are still widely available in print. Much progress has been made in the past few years in understanding how dogs think and learn. We are able to deal with problem behaviors much more effectively once we understand how a dog’s mind thinks. Read more than one book and pick the methods that make the most sense to you. Consult with our staff if you are having problems. In severe cases, we may refer you to a pet behavioral specialist.

Consider using the **PROMISE**™ halter. This is a different style of training collar, which takes advantage of the dog’s natural response to pressure over the muzzle and behind the ears rather than a choke collar. Promise™ halters are more humane and more effective in solving several behavioral problems. We have short videotape on the use of this system in our office.

Using food as a reward for learning new commands is OK, but don’t give a food reward every time. Giving food intermittently means your dog will perform commands for you even when you don’t have a food, and also prevents weight gain. Keep all training positive and consistent. Call us to discuss any specific problems that develop with your pet.