

Keep It Real

Managing expectations about your dog's behavior makes for a good relationship

WE LIVE IN A FAST-PACED, results-oriented society, one in which technology advances at warp speed and solutions to many of our everyday problems are often just a mouse-click away. Our increasingly hectic lifestyles mean that we waste very little time getting our needs met. This is fine if we're ordering a couch and decide that blue tapestry is more to our liking than vintage brown leather. Chances are good that we'll get just what we ordered. The same is often true when buying a car, a boat or the latest status toy. For the most part, we get what we want, and we get it without much effort.

Living with inanimate objects is very different from sharing a home with a four-legged best friend, however. Dogs, as we are learning from a wealth of newly published research, display sensitivity, emotion and advanced cognitive skills; they also have an understanding of fairness, and perhaps most importantly, they have the capacity to form intense social relationships with humans, other dogs and even other species. In my 15-plus years of scientifically studying and training dogs as well as treating their life-threatening behavioral problems, I have yet to see a pre-packaged dog, one who comes out of the box perfectly behaved and needing only food, water and a leash. It just doesn't happen that way. Nor should it.



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RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

When we bring a new dog into our life, we enter into an interpersonal relationship that entails a responsibility on our part. As a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist, my goal is to help clients foster relationships based on trust, understanding and friendship.

What does it mean to enter into a relationship with a dog? Among other things, it means that:

► **We see our dogs for who they are, which is based on thousands of years of evolutionary history. Dogs are not furry little people.** They have their own heritage. Whenever possible, look at your surroundings through your dog's eyes. If you were removed from the only world you knew and placed in an unfamiliar environment—like a puppy separated from her littermates or a dog rescued from the streets—chances are you might feel a little unsure, anxious and perhaps even fearful. It's not unreasonable to expect that our new dog might feel that way, too. In some situations, a careful dose of anthropomorphism can be useful.

► **We cut our new dog some slack.** Ike isn't peeing on the leg of your brand-new baby grand piano because he's mad at you. Perhaps instead, he's feeling anxious about being left home alone, or maybe he's just not fully house-trained yet; even adult rescues often need housetraining help. A new puppy or adult dog should never be given free rein of the house right from the start. It's a recipe for disaster.

► **We learn to communicate with our dog in a way that she can understand.** This is what good dog training is all about. If I were put in a room with a group of Spanish-speaking people, I wouldn't be able to converse with them because I've never learned to speak Spanish. However, I have the ability to learn that language; with some training, people can learn to speak "dog," too. Trainer Bob Bailey once said that "training is a mechanical skill." It can

be learned and refined with time and practice.

As an academically trained ethologist, I also believe that a big part of learning how to communicate with our dogs involves developing keen observational skills. Spend some time quietly watching your dog and learning about her personality. Does she take on new tasks with joie de vivre, or does she tend toward a more laid-back, wait-and-see approach? Respecting who your dog is and what she needs to feel safe and understood fosters trust and builds lasting partnerships.

► **We connect with a trainer who understands how animals learn; emphasizes modern, positive-reinforcement-based training methods; and is involved in continuing education.** A good trainer focuses on teaching the dog what you want her to do and rewarding desirable behaviors rather than catching the dog doing something wrong and punishing bad behaviors. A growing body of literature suggests that punishment- or dominance-based training methods do more harm than good by creating fear and anxiety in some dogs.* Healthy relationships—whether between two people or between a person and dog—are built on fairness and respect, not fear.

EXPECTATION PITFALLS

Having realistic expectations for your dog at each stage of her life and training is important to forming and maintaining a healthy bond. Even if you've already made a good deal of progress toward your goals, be mindful of the pitfalls. The road to relationship-building is littered with unrealistic expectations. Following are some of the more common.

► **One training class will teach your dog everything she needs to know.** A single class is just a warm-up, one that needs to be followed with more classes or in-home training. Dog training builds upon previously learned skills; expectations are gradually raised as



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the dog becomes increasingly successful at performing the trainer’s requests. Training should be fun for everyone (dog and human). If you’re asking your dog to do something and she’s unable to follow through, you may simply be asking too much of her too soon—she’s not ready for that level, she may be stressed or she may be having a bad day. We humans have bad days, and nothing says our dogs can’t have bad days, too. If this happens, take a break and reassess the training plan. Never take it out on the dog.

► **Once your dog learns a behavior, you never need to reinforce it.** I once met a couple walking their rambunctious young Labrador in the woods and asked if they did any training with their “wild child.” The man replied, “Yes, we took her to puppy class, but she forgot everything that she learned.” Just like your own workout program, when it comes to dog training, “use it or lose it” prevails. Don’t blame the dog if she can’t remember something you taught her last year but haven’t practiced since then.

► **At home with no distractions, your dog comes when called, so she’ll do the same thing at the dog park, even if she’s engaged in a game of chase with her best dog friend.** No, she won’t. This

simple reality often throws people. I hear things like “Peaches is usually so good about coming, except when she’s at the dog park or there are other dogs around. Then, she doesn’t seem to care.” Training Peaches to come to you (or to reliably perform other behaviors) when there is nothing else interesting nearby is one thing; training her to come when she’s running full-out at the dog park is almost akin to teaching another behavior entirely. You need to train and re-train in each environment in which you expect your dog to perform the behavior.

In puppy class, I start teaching “come” away from distractions. I let the pups play with one another, then after a minute or two, I put a tasty treat right in front of the dog’s nose and say the dog’s name, followed by the command (“Sasha, come!”) in a happy, upbeat voice while luring the dog a few feet away from her playmate. She gets the treat, and then I release her with an “okay,” which means she can go back and play some more. It’s a proverbial win-win.

I had an occasion to put this training to use a couple of years ago when my one-year-old Doberman, Jimmy, was visiting a dog park near my house. Two dogs had started fighting, which quickly drew the attention of other dogs nearby.



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What started out as a fight between two quickly evolved into a fight among many. Nervous, I looked for Jimmy and noticed that he was gearing up to join the fray. My heart pounding in my throat, I tried hard to keep my voice happy as I called “Jimmy, come!” To my surprise, he turned away from the melee and ran full-speed toward me. Phew! That was close!

► **A well-trained dog responds to our directives 100 percent of the time.** Nope, that’s not the case. When I tell people this, some are surprised and others are relieved. Dogs are living beings; sometimes they just aren’t going to do what we ask even if they know how to do it. A realistic response rate is roughly 80 percent, and this comes after a good bit of time has been invested in training.

► **All dogs like dog parks.** Again, nope. Some people love large parties, and they find meeting and mingling with a group of total strangers exhilarating; for others, the experience is fraught with anxiety. Some of us (yours truly included) prefer small, intimate gatherings with a few close friends. Dogs are the same. Don’t force your dog to go to a dog park or daycare facility if she doesn’t like being there. If you do, you may inadvertently set the stage for future behavioral problems.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PUPPIES

Puppies are like sponges, soaking up information about their world. So it’s important that their guardians learn to communicate with them in a humane

and effective way right from the start. Through my business, About Dogs LLC, I offer a special “Puppy Head Start” lesson for clients who are waiting for a well-run group puppy class to start but in the meantime are going crazy because they don’t know how to handle their new pint-sized wrecking ball. Here are a few of the concerns that I often address through Puppy Head Start:

► **Just because your St. Bernard puppy is jumping on the children when they run, biting and mouthing hands, and eating shoes, it doesn’t mean she’s going to grow up to be Cujo.** I get frantic calls, sometimes well after office hours, from people who are convinced that they have an aggressive puppy. In some cases they do, but more often than not, they and their families need to learn how to manage a puppy (and how to manage the children around the puppy), provide appropriate outlets for natural behaviors like chewing, and create an environment of predictability and structure in which desirable behaviors produce salient rewards for the new dog. As a result, “good behaviors” are reinforced and become more common.

► **Unfortunately, some dog books foster unrealistic expectations.** For example, people might think, “Why isn’t my puppy housetrained in seven days like the book says?” In my experience, there is no set time line for housetraining puppies. Yes, we all want it to go as fast and as smoothly as possible, but it doesn’t always happen that way, even if we are being extra vigilant. It took my Labrador, Marty, whom we brought home at eight weeks, only a month to learn this, but my Doberman puppy, Acorn, was seven months old before she consistently signaled to go outside. And it was entirely my fault. Acorn would play with Marty for hours, having so much fun that she would take a quick potty break on her dog bed before resuming play. Shame on me! I was so caught up in the dogs’ fun that I sometimes forgot I needed to be working on

housetraining too. I couldn’t blame Acorn for my own oversight.

I now have a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel puppy, Tango. He’s 11 months old, and it’s been six weeks since he’s had an accident in the house; plus, he’s scratching at the back door when he needs to go outside. I think (fingers crossed) that he’s finally housetrained. Smaller dogs often take longer than larger dogs to figure this out, and some breeds can be more challenging than others. But with patience and attention on your part, they can all learn.

► **There is no excuse for getting rough with your puppy or dog.** Alpha rolls (forcing a dog on her back), scruff shakes (picking a puppy up by the back of her neck and shaking her) or muzzle grabs (cupping your hand around the dog’s muzzle in an attempt to discourage mouthing) are never acceptable. The only thing they potentially teach your puppy is to be fearful of you, which can pave the way for future aggression.



Friendships between people are based on realistic expectations of who the other is (and is not), and it’s the same with our dogs. When a new dog enters our life, we can choose to create a deep, lasting friendship with that animal, or to let things drift into irritation and remoteness. The type of relationship we develop depends on our capacity to understand and meet our dog’s needs, based on realistic expectations of what is possible. Relationships are like a dance, and when that dance works, the relationship grows and endures, and enriches our lives in many priceless ways. ③

*Blackwell, E., et al. 2008. The relationship between training methods and the occurrence of behavior problems, as reported by owners, in a population of domestic dogs. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, 3 (5): 207–217; Herron, M. E., et al. 2009. Survey of the use and outcome of confrontational and non-confrontational training methods in client-owned dogs showing undesired behaviors. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 117: 47–54.