



Training Good Owners

Do you want your pet to be the best-behaved pet in the neighborhood? Do you want your cat to be perfectly clicker trained and your dog to fetch the morning paper, iPad or your slippers? What is the secret to achieve a well-behaved pet? The answer is easy. Get yourself to a behavior trainer. Surprise! We call it pet behavior training, but what actually occurs is we humans learn how to interact with our pets using the proper body language, hand signs and verbal cues that the pet can understand. All pets even birds cats and iguanas can be trained. We will focus on dogs for the purpose of this article.

Behavior training is sometimes called obedience training. This may be because the first dog training session occurred in the military and had a lot in common with military boot camp. This military dog obedience training did influence family dog behavior training. People still do train their dogs for obedience trials but they also train for hunting, search and rescue, assistance to people with disabilities, police work, therapy work and much more.

As these specialized dog-training classes evolved the family dog behavior class came into being. It is designed to train you and your dog to communicate better and to live successfully in your community. Instead of trying to control your dog physically you'll be able to tell your dog what you need with hand signals, clicker or verbal cues. This is a much less stressful and safer way to manage your dog's behavior. Your home will become a peaceable kingdom instead of a battleground.

As a veterinarian, when I see a puppy for the first few visits I ask when the family will get the pup to puppy training. The pup needs to be socialized. That means the pup should be introduced to three new people and three new (trusted) dogs a day. One behavior training class a week goes a long ways towards this socialization process. I recommend the pup start training at 12 weeks of age. If I see a six-month dog that has not received training and is now a 50 lb whirling dervish, biting and jumping at peoples' faces and lunging on the leash at dogs and passers-by, I fear for that dog's future. Inevitably the family tires of the dog, it is labeled as a bad dog and soon is given up to the pound and many times put to sleep.

Animal and human behavior is a fascinating science. Many non- veterinarians are certified behaviorists and devote their lives to improving the owner and pet bond through training classes. There are veterinary behaviorists who have spent 2-3 years after veterinary school in a residency learning about animal behavior. I have seen some very challenging dog behavior problems presented to t boarded veterinary behaviorists and have been amazed that their prescription is many times to go back to some of them most basic behavior training and consistently train/ retrain basic skills to make the dog feel more secure. Teaching the dog to establish eye contact on command or to sit and stay ten

times in the morning and again at night stimulates the dog to have respect for the family member doing the training and gives the dog a constructive “job” twice a day. It also gives the dog constructive attention and teaches it a skill. This makes your dog feel much more secure as it happens on a schedule, which dogs love. The behavior learned could be used to calm the dog in a situation where it might be scared or uncomfortable. A dog that is trained to sit stay and is praised in the face of meeting a stranger or going to visit the groomer will be calmed because it can replace the nervous acting out behavior with a good trained behavior such as sit/stay.

We humans need the training as well because we are primates. Canines, felines and most other animals do not understand human behavior. We tend to wave our hands a lot and yell “No” when we don’t like what our dog is doing. Dogs think yelling and hand waving is reason to get even more excited and out of control. Dogs respond to a calm upbeat voice of higher pitch. They respond well to body language. For instance they tend to come to us more readily when called if we are leaning slightly backward. They do not understand pointing to go in a certain direction. They think when we smile we are bearing our teeth as an aggressor dog would do.

Some of the most basic behaviors are taught in family behavior classes. These behaviors must be reinforced throughout the dog’s life to maintain the training. Positive reinforcement can be the word good, a click, eye contact and or tiny food treat and should be varied.

1. Come when called this must be practiced with your dog on leash (usually a really long one) everywhere you go with your dog.
2. Sit and or Down. This gets your dog anchored to one spot
3. Stay. Practicing this helps your dog to learn composure and remain calm
4. Walk on a loose lead. Trainers argue about what is the best collar. Currently harnesses are considered the best. Head halters are also popular as they prevent your dog from putting pressure with the shoulders and dragging you, as an ox would pull its yoke. Whichever you use, it is rendered useless if your dog is constantly dragging you forward on it. Training to a loose lead involves keeping the dog’s attention on the owner for direction/attention/treats. Handling the leash loose prevents injuries to the owner (dislocated shoulders for instance) and the dog, abraded skin and fur loss.
5. Housetraining Lack of proper house training is a major cause of small dogs losing their homes. Possibly you are satisfied with pee pads for your small dog, but frequently the small dog will extrapolate to think it is OK to urinate other locations in the house such as rugs. Contemplate how you will feel about this in the future and think about what your dog’s chances are of being rehomed if not trained. The habits a dog forms when someone is too busy to train it take some time to change, especially if they have been ingrained during puppyhood.
6. The ability to rest calmly in a safe confined area whether it is a crate or room. Crates are best, as they are needed for transport for travel in car or air.
7. Not to bite humans. They should be trained not to put teeth on human skin.

Training does not count until the dog can perform it reliably when under stress. That is why consistent training every day and throughout the dog’s life is so important. If your dog got loose and was on the other side of a busy street from you is she trained well enough to sit /stay until you can cross and leash her? How about if she sees a squirrel? Is the training enough to save your dog’s life?

Reading suggestions:

The Other End of the Leash by Patricia McConnell

The Culture Clash by Jean Donaldson

Dr. Elizabeth Bradt