



Being Your Dog's Leader for Life

Dogs are pack animals by nature, and every pack needs a leader. When the leadership in your family's "pack" is not clear, it can lead to anxiety, fear or aggression in your dog. Newly adopted dogs or dogs experiencing behavior problems will benefit from this Leadership Training Program.

Building Trust

After you bring your dog home, the first two weeks are considered the "dating period" in which your dog is on its best behavior. This time is spent observing and learning about their new home and the people and pets in it. Most importantly, your dog is learning who you are to them. It is important that during this time you keep your home as calm and stress-free as possible and that you avoid throwing too much at your dog too soon. Meaning, as much as you might want to, you should resist taking them to new places (except the vet!) or introducing them to new people outside of your immediate family. This time should be spent bonding with your dog, earning their trust, establishing your leadership and setting boundaries. If you take them to a place that makes them nervous or overwhelm them with strangers, your dog can easily become stressed and either shut down or lash out because they are afraid. Your dog will have learned that their new owner, instead of protecting them and guiding them, only puts them in scary situations, and they will have a difficult time trusting you. Only after your dog has spent quality time with you and learned to trust you can you begin taking them to new places and introducing them to new people. Typically this will happen after two weeks and your dog will begin to relax, allowing their true personality to emerge. Going on walks should also wait until you have earned your dog's trust. Until then, exercise your dog at home with toys or by playing with them in the yard.

Providing Structure and Reliability

Providing structure and a predictable routine is very important for dogs, especially those that suffer from anxiety or may be stressed from being in a shelter environment and moving into a new home. Dogs who spent time scavenging on the street may be anxious about food, so mealtimes should be scheduled at the same time every day. Dogs who were surrendered to the shelter by their previous owners may fear being abandoned, so arriving home should be kept as regular as possible. Social interactions should also be kept on a predictable basis. If your dog knows that a walk or playtime is coming soon, they will often be relaxed during the day.

Crate Training

Teaching your dog to enjoy spending time in a crate can be very helpful in establishing your leadership. Wolves and wild dog packs will always seek out an enclosed space, such as a den, to sleep in because it helps them feel safe knowing they are protected on all sides. Think of a crate as giving them their own bedroom where they can go to if they are feeling nervous, such as when guests come over to your house, fireworks go off, or when they just want to take a nap. However, this space should be safe even from you. If you scold your dog and they run into their

crate, you should never reach in and pull them out or tip the crate. Instead, you should lure your dog out with food or by gentle coaxing. Crate training your dog also ensures that your dog will be safe when you are not at home. A new dog left alone unsupervised in your home could end up chewing on power cords and getting electrocuted, ingesting a toxic substance, choking on or swallowing something harmful, escaping, peeing or pooping all over your home or getting into fights with other animals; the list could go on and on. When your dog is in a crate, you know they will be safe and unable to get into trouble. Any time you cannot physically be supervising your dog, they should be in their crate. This includes when you go to work, take a shower, work on the computer, or you are otherwise occupied and cannot keep an eye on what your dog is doing. You need to be able to catch your dog in the act should they do something wrong and reward them when they are doing something right, like laying calmly in a relaxed state on the floor.

Limiting Freedom

One of the biggest mistakes new owners make is giving their dogs too much freedom too soon and allowing their new dog to roam around the entire house unsupervised. This is a set-up for disaster, because when your dog can do whatever it wants, there is no structure, no leadership, no opportunity to correct bad behavior, and no opportunity to reward good behavior. Freedom is a privilege, not a right, and it should be earned through good behavior. Any time you let your dog out of the crate, you should keep them ONLY in the room that you are in by blocking access to all other rooms. You can do this by closing doors or blocking entryways with baby gates. In time, after your dog has thoroughly learned the rules of the house and has gone for 1-2 weeks without any incidences can you slowly begin to expand their territory. Only allow them to have unsupervised freedom into one additional room every 1-2 weeks, until over time they have earned your trust and can have access to the entire house. If there are any accidents or inappropriate behaviors (chewing, barking, getting into trash, etc), then remove access to that room until they earn it back with another 2 weeks of good behavior. Take it slow. Set your dog up for success by earning freedom slowly instead of throwing them into a fun-house with endless opportunities to get into trouble, simply because you weren't watching them. If you wouldn't leave a toddler alone to roam around your home alone, then you shouldn't leave your dog either until they are following the rules of the house reliably.

Playing Follow the Leader

For dogs who may need a little more help understanding who the real leader in the house is, it may be helpful to play "follow the leader." To do this, attach your dog's leash to your belt or hold it and have them follow you as you go about your day. This will teach your dog to move with you as a pack, and that you are the pack leader. After several days to a week of this, you can remove the leash and instead call your dog to follow you from room to room, praising them as they follow you.

Setting Boundaries

When you let your dog out of the crate, you should keep them in the room that you are in so you can correct them when they do something wrong. Dogs live in the moment, so if you walk into another room and find your shoes chewed up and your dog is nowhere in sight, you cannot scold them for it because they will not understand what they did wrong. By keeping them within your line of sight, you can catch them in the act and interrupt the behavior the instant it happens. You can correct their bad behaviors by saying "Ah-Ah!" to interrupt it and immediately praising them when they stop what they were doing. If your "Ah-Ah!" is not forceful enough to interrupt the behavior, then you may need to try stomping your foot or

clapping your hands while you say it. If that does not work, you can try using a squirt bottle filled with water to squirt your dog as you correct them, or you can shake an empty aluminum can filled with pennies. Just remember, if you are going to correct the behavior, be sure to praise them when they stop and are doing the right thing. For example: if you correct your dog for jumping, praise when all four paws are back on the ground.

Saying Please

In a pack situation, the leader or "alpha," decides everything- when the pack moves, eats, drinks, sleeps, plays, etc, so we can use this knowledge to teach our dogs to earn everything from us too. There is an old saying that goes, "there is no such thing as a free lunch." In dog training, this means that our dogs do not get anything from us for free; everything they receive has to be earned. To do this, we ask our dog to perform a command, such as Sit, Down, Stay, Paw, etc, in order to get their meals, treats, attention, patting, play time, access to the yard for potty breaks, to be let out of their crate- absolutely everything. This teaches your dog to look to you for their resources and the things that they want, because if they can get their food, toys, potty breaks, etc, by themselves whenever they want them, then what do they need to listen to you for?

Rewarding the Right Behaviors

In addition to treats, praise and play time, dogs view any form of eye contact, touching, or talking to them as a reward, so it is very important to pay attention to what behaviors you are rewarding. Pushing a dog down when he jumps on you, shouting at your dog when he is barking, or holding and trying to soothe them when they lunge and bark at another dog on a walk are all common examples of how owners may inadvertently reinforce bad behaviors. When your dog does something that you do not want them to continue doing, either correct the behavior and reward them for doing the right thing, or ignore the behavior completely by turning or walking away from your dog. Also be sure not to reward pushy, attention-seeking behaviors. These can include nudging or barking at you for attention, jumping up on you or pushing toys towards you. These behaviors should simply be ignored. This does not mean we have to ignore our dog completely and deny them love and affection. Quite the contrary! We are simply structuring how they receive it. Leaders do not give attention away for free, they give it only after it is earned, so if your dog is demanding it from you then the leadership in your home is still unclear to them. When you know that your dog wants to play or be patted, simply have them earn it by performing a command first. If your dog does not respond to the command the first time, give no reward and end the interaction by looking or walking away. If your dog performs a command before you request it, ask for a different command.

Regulating Mealtime

The leader of a dog pack gets first pick of the best food, and so should you. Enjoy your dinner, then feed your dog after you have eaten. Do not leave your dog's food down all day, because if your dog can get whatever they need by themselves, what do they need to listen to you for? Have your dog do a command to earn his food, and only leave it down for a maximum of 20 minutes. If your dog walks away without finishing it, pick the bowl up after 20 minutes and have him wait until the next mealtime to eat again. Be firm in your resolve if your dog goes on a hunger strike and refuses to eat at mealtimes and continue with the 20-minute mealtime routine NO MATTER WHAT. Dogs will not starve themselves. They will eat eventually, and it will be on your schedule, not theirs. This is also a great way of preventing your dog from becoming a picky eater and is helpful with potty training!

Walking Tips

If your dog has gotten away with barking, lunging and going crazy on the leash, it must be corrected. If this behavior is not corrected, the behavior is reinforced and the dog will be quicker to do it again the next time. Behavior like this should not be tolerated. If gaining control is a problem, you may need to consult a trainer to help you get control of your dog. Try your best to prevent the behavior from happening at all. Observe your dog's body postures. When your dog goes from happy and wiggly to stiff and rigid, with his ears and tail erect, an outburst is likely to happen. Prevent the outburst by re-directing your dog by walking them in the opposite direction of whatever they are focusing on and reward them when their attention is back on you. Repeat this process until your dog understands that when they alert to something and begin to react inappropriately, they get taken further away from what they want. If your dog does end up having an outburst, remain calm, correct the behavior and/or quickly walk them away. Only continue on your walk when your dog is calm and back under control.

Obedience Training

The final, and most important part of establishing your leadership with your dog is to take a training class with them, even if your dog already knows the commands. With the guidance of an experienced trainer, you can teach your dog how to perform basic commands that are fun and will help you form a healthy, long lasting relationship with your dog.