

10 Tips for Problem Behavior

10 basic rules that will help you teach your dog more desirable behavior.

By Suzanne Clothier

At one time or another, every owner has to deal with problem behavior. Understanding why your dog does what he does, and how to handle the situation correctly can help resolve problems quickly. Here are some basic guidelines that apply to nearly all problem situations:

Control the dog and you control the situation. By putting on a training collar and lead, you can control the dog. For many dogs, their training equipment means business, not playtime, and this can help in a problem situation. A dog who is on lead cannot run away or chase people or other animals, and his owner has a chance to help him understand what he should do by guiding him with the leash and collar.

Be positive. Instead of saying "NO", try giving your dog something positive that he can do for you, such as "Sit", or "Heel". This positive approach means you can praise generously for his good actions, instead of simply yelling at him. For example, a dog who jumps up can be told to sit, and helped if necessary, then praised for sitting.

Allow a dog to be a dog. Often, what owners consider problem behavior is simply normal dog behavior that they find unpleasant or annoying. For example, digging is a natural canine activity but distressing to a garden proud owner. Instead of scolding for what comes naturally, it might be kinder to set up an area in which you have buried small treats to make it more attractive than the rest of the yard, and praising your dog for digging in "his" garden.

Whenever natural behaviors conflict with what you might like, be creative and see if you can find an outlet for those interests and activities that is suitable for you both.

Be consistent. It is unfair to the dog to change your rules depending on what you're wearing, who's visiting or the kind of day you've had. If your dog is allowed on the furniture, he will be confused when you yell at him because Aunt Bess is visiting and she doesn't think dogs should sit in chairs! If he's allowed to jump up when you're wearing jeans and a sweatshirt, don't be surprised if he can't tell the difference between that and your best evening gown. Whatever your rules are, keep them consistent.

Have your dog earn what he wants. While everyone needs a few freebies now and then, your dog will not think you are a wonderful owner if you play with him, walk him, feed him and pet him whenever he demands it. In fact, this often creates problems since from the dog's point of view an owner who can be "trained" this well is not one who deserves much respect. Teach

your dog to say "please" by sitting, laying down or following some other command before he gets what he wants.

Be clear. Owners often confuse dogs by changing the words or commands, repeating them over and over again without showing the dog what is meant, and worst of all, assuming that the dog understands.

When in doubt, gently show your dog physically exactly what you mean, giving the command at the same time so that he can associate the two. Use clear, matter of fact commands when addressing your dog, and be sure that your praising tone is excited, enthusiastic and upbeat.

Remember that while we use words to communicate, dogs are masters of reading body language. If your body language tells the dog one thing, but your voice tells the dog something else, chances are he will believe your body language. This is why people who bend towards their dog and shake a finger at them while scolding "No, no, no" often receive a playful bark - their body posture is much more like a dog inviting play than a dog who is annoyed or angry.

Exercise, exercise, exercise! The most common cause of problem behavior is boredom and a lack of sufficient exercise. While you work or go out, your dog has little or nothing to do, and his need to exercise will not go away. A familiar yard or house is boring, and few dogs exercise on their own without interaction with their owners. Take the time to play with your dog, jog with him, walk in the woods, swim or take long brisk walks each day. A tired dog is always a well behaved dog!

Provide mental stimulation. Dr. Roger Abrante's suggestions regarding using 1/3 of your dog's diet for treats to be earned during training, 1/3 to be given as usual in a food bowl, and 1/3 to be "hunted" (try a Buster Cube, an ingenious toy which the dog must persistently work with to receive a few kibble at a time. Even a border collie will be amused by this for hours! Buster Cubes are available from your local pet store or from DogWise.com.) This "home alone" 1/3-1/3-1/3 program helps your dog expend some energy and provides much needed stimulation.

Understand your dog's genetic heritage. Whether you own a Doberman or a Beagle, a Samoyed or a Westie, it is important to understand what your dog was bred to do. Owners often forget that the behavior that prompts a dog to run or stay close, hunt or guard, chase and kill or herd, work with people or work independently are all the result of generations of carefully selected traits. Research your breed's history, and talk to people who understand your breed's characteristics. You may find that Rover's tendencies, while annoying or amusing, are precisely what makes him what he is. You can then decide how best to work with your dog's instincts and where you need to concentrate training efforts.

Train your dog. Every dog should have basic manners, but dogs are not born knowing how to behave. Take the time to train your dog on a consistent basis using kind, positive methods. Find a class near you whose methods and philosophies you like. If faced with a behavior problem you can't solve, ask people you trust for a recommendation of an experienced trainer and get professional help fast. The sooner you begin working on a problem the sooner you will have it solved.

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