

## **How to be a Good (& effective) Leader**

Although there is some discussion about whether dogs truly consider people as part of their “pack,” I think everyone agrees that they do recognize - and respect - leadership.

Every group has a leader, and if the dog in the family senses that none of the humans is taking that role, they will likely rise to fill it. Along with the responsibilities of leadership comes that of discipline. And no human wants to be disciplined by a dog!

Being a good leader for your pet does not mean being rough. It does, however, mean being strong and confident; sure in what you do. Some people seem to act this way naturally, others need a little help. Below I've listed some of the things you can do which will help your dog recognize you as a leader. Your entire family should be familiar with these rules and apply them consistently - especially children!

*\* Please note! If aggression is already a concern, then proceed very carefully! Best advice in that case is to get the help of an animal behaviorist who can work privately with you. Call your vet, local obedience schools, or animal shelters for recommendations. Be sure to hire someone who uses positive reinforcement methods!*

### **Give your dog plenty of attention, exercise, play, and grooming!**

So many behavioral problems are due to insufficient exercise and pure boredom. Dogs are social animals and they need exercise (some breeds more than others). If your dog is driving you crazy, try getting up 1/2 hr earlier every day and taking him for a walk or run. Don't take young dogs for long walks as you need to wait for their growth plates to close - ask your vet for when this will be for your breed. But once they are ready, definitely walk with your dog at least 60 minutes EACH DAY. This can be broken up into smaller walks (i.e. 30 mins in the morning, 30 in the evening). Do this even if your dog has lots of playtime in the yard - walking with you is very relationship-building as well as exercising. You might be amazed at the change in him! Work hard on that Loose-Leash Walking lesson to make this as fun for you as it is for him. Most breeds were bred to perform a duty and if not given a “job” to do, will invent their own...

### **Feed your dog!**

Providing the food is an important leadership role, so make it clear that you are doing so. Instead of leaving a bowlful of food out all day, have mealtimes where your dog can eagerly await you placing his bowl - filled with high quality food - down for him. As soon as your dog has some basic training, have him give eye contact or do a quick stay before he gets the bowl.

### **Have the right of way**

Is your dog in your way or where you want to be? Move him. Give him a nudge & say “move.” If that provokes growling or snarling, then please contact a behaviorist. Unless there is a history of abuse, then your dog probably already thinks HE is the leader, and that you are out of line telling him to move. Since you don't want to be bitten, get professional help, please! A young, healthy dog should move out of your way. When he gets old & arthritic, then you can start stepping over or around him.

### **Greet the human members of your family first**

When you come home, greet any other members of your family before giving any attention to your dog. This may be difficult, as your family members probably aren't bounding up to the door to say hello! However, do your best to walk past your dog and to hug or kiss your family members before turning to crouch & calmly greet your dog.

### **Play games & keep the toys when you are done**

Initiate fun games with your dog, such as retrieving games, tug o' war, and hide & seek. Have special toys for these games that you get from a closet or drawer, and when the game is over be sure to put the toys back away. In a sense, these toys are special “kills” for your dog, and the pack leader should have control over them.

### **Eat before you feed your dog**

The top pack members get first choice at the food, but since you probably aren't interested in your dog's dinner, just be

sure to eat your own first! If you're not ready yet, then just have a cracker or a drink of water... and be sure your dog is watching.

### **Be sure your dog earns your attention**

Every meal, play session, petting session, etc., should start with your dog responding to you, not the other way around. This needn't be complicated, just have your dog sit or respond to his name (the Attention work!) before you do something for him. Or call him to come to you for the fun!

### **Go through narrow openings first**

In other words, don't let your dog blow past you through the door or up or down the stairs! This is as much a safety issue as it is a leadership one. Teach him the Wait or Stay command. Until then, just take hold of his collar and hold him in place while you walk through the door. That's a bit trickier with the stairs, so work hard on those commands! Once your dog is reliable with those commands, then you can certainly choose to let him go ahead first if that is more convenient for you. But he should wait for your permission to proceed.

### **Ignore your dog if you are busy**

Of course, this is only feasible if you give him plenty of attention & exercise otherwise. But don't feel that you are at your dog's beck & call! Hardly dignified behavior for a leader...

### **Put your dog in "Time Out" if he is getting out of control**

If playtime with you is getting too rowdy, or playing with another dog is starting to get nasty, then quietly put your dog in "Time Out." That can be his crate (as long as he is already comfortable with it), or simply in another room for a few minutes. If you are consistent with this, he will soon learn to control his behavior so the fun can continue! Do realize that dogs can sound pretty awful when playing with each other. They can bark, growl, have their hackles up, nip at each other - all is usually fine as long as they are bouncy. If they start to get stiff or if blood is being drawn, of course, it's time to end it.

### **Realize that your dog is a dog**

Remember that everything dogs do that we dislike - biting, barking, jumping up, eliminating inside, chewing, etc. - is totally normal dog behavior! If we want our dogs to stop doing these things, then it is completely our responsibility to train him not to. No fair expecting him to "know better" or to learn to stop doing something so natural and fun just because he was caught & punished a few times. Often dogs can simply learn that they can't do those things in the presence of a human. Instead, make sure your dog gets plenty of exercise and has appropriate things to chew (real meaty bones from the butcher, Kongs or bones stuffed with treats are great!) If a problem behavior continues, then realize that the fault lies in your training and management (or lack thereof). So take the time to think about the behavior and think about what you can do the change things. Don't expect your dog to act like Lassie, because "Lassie" really never existed. She was just a well trained Collie, with a smart trainer who was always just out of camera range.

### **Reinforce what you like**

Be sure to clearly communicate to your dog what behaviors you DO like! Someone walked by the window and he didn't bark at them? "What a good boy!" A reinforcement can be a treat, praise, an ear rub, a ball thrown... whatever your dog loves. If being "naughty" is the only way your dog gets you to pay attention to him, then expect him to be naughty a lot.

### **Ignore what you don't like (or make it stop "working" for the dog)**

Unless the behavior is dangerous or really destructive, ignore behaviors you don't like. And realize that any attention from you is reinforcing! Yelling, hitting, shoving - all are forms of attention, which your dog naturally craves. A far more effective teaching method is to ignore the undesirable behavior. If it's something that the dog has been doing for a long time, earning your attention every time, then you can pretty much expect it to get worse before it stops. Whatever he was doing worked before, so he may try harder & harder to get it to work again. Stand your ground! Eventually he'll give up, having learned it doesn't work anymore. The behavior will be extinguished. (Be careful - if you ignore something for a while, then give in, you'll have taught him that he needs to be really annoying to get your attention!) And in many situations, you can think about what you would rather your dog be doing. Instead of begging at the table, how about reinforcing a down stay during your meal?

Of course, some behaviors are reinforced without your attention. “Counter surfing,” barking at the neighbors, getting in the trash, chasing cars, etc... So do your best to manage the environment so that those behaviors either become impossible for the dog (put the trash in a closet, don't let him run loose to chase cars), or stop working for the dog (if trips to the counter yield no food, he'll stop bothering to do so).

**Train desirable behaviors**

Which is what the rest of this web site is about! If you haven't already, please go to the lessons & start learning how. Great trainers have great dogs!

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\*using positive methods to teach people how to teach their pets!