

## On Best Behavior: Follow the leader

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The ideal relationship between you and your dog is one of love and trust. Building this foundation takes time, patience and consistent training. It is also crucial to a happy and satisfying relationship that your canine companion learns to see you as a leader. Unless your pet learns to respect you as the leader, she is likely to engage in a variety of negative behaviors that can tarnish, and even destroy, the friendship.

To establish your role as a fair and trusting leader, train with patience and without force to encourage your dog to respond to your direction. Training with positive reinforcement motivates your dog to behave the way you would like her to behave. After all, your pet looks to you for guidance as she navigates through a "human world."

Consistent training is the key. Dogs learn by making connections between events. They quickly understand that certain behaviors bring about certain consequences. If the consequence of the behavior is rewarding to the dog, then she is likely to repeat it. If it is nonrewarding, the behavior is likely to be extinguished. Dogs do what works for THEM. It's that simple.

If you do not consistently enforce your rules and boundaries, your dog will undoubtedly become confused. Confusion often leads to inappropriate behavior. To be successful, your entire family must establish a set of rules that are reasonable and clearly understood by all. Don't assume that your dog automatically understands your "human" rules. She must learn them through trial and error.

If compliance is a problem, you have probably miscommunicated with your dog. Dogs don't deliberately disobey and they don't stay up at night dreaming of ways to get into trouble. They are not spiteful or stubborn, and they do not feel guilt. These are all human emotions that have been attributed to canines by people trying to justify their dogs' behavior.

Here are some common sense measures to establish your leadership and avoid problems:

### **Manage your dog's environment.**

Do not put your dog in a situation where she can fail. The environment can be very rewarding to your dog: tissues in a basket, a peanut butter sandwich left unattended, a child's toy on the floor—all can tempt even the most well-behaved canine. If your dog cannot be trusted in the house when left unsupervised, she should be kept in her crate or a small room until she has earned her freedom.

### **Be gentle and patient.**

Physical confrontations and force are not necessary to establish your leadership role. Leaders are fair and gain respect through their intelligence, not through force and harsh punishments.

### **Behavior is most often associated with a geographical "place" in the dog's mind.**

Dogs do not immediately generalize. Don't expect your pet to obey your every request unless you work with her in a variety of locations. Dogs will make mistakes. This is all part of the learning process. Forgive and forget the mistakes and focus on training your dog to do what you want instead.

□ **Take time for daily play and exercise.**

Time spent with your dog helps build a strong, healthy relationship. Establish rules for your games as well. For example, if your dog won't release the Frisbee, she must be taught to release it on cue so the game can continue. If she insists on changing the rules by tugging or running off, then stop the game.

□ **Teach your dog to accept and enjoy touch and handling.**

When on the floor, spend time massaging your dog, rolling her over, giving belly rubs, leaning over her and hugging. In canine language, these gestures can be threatening. Your dog must learn to feel comfortable with you in order to trust you.

□ **Feed your dog on a regular, predictable schedule.**

Ask your dog to sit and wait before eating, rather than allowing her to dive head-first into the bowl even before it hits the floor. Periodically go near your dog when she is eating and drop special treats into the bowl (better than her regular kibble). Your dog must learn that your hands are there to "give" not "take away." If your dog has exhibited threatening behaviors around her food bowl, do not remove the bowl while she is eating. Seek the advice of a professional as this behavior could result in an aggressive action like biting.

Always remember that your dog does not make the rules. If your dog sleeps with you, it is not necessary to get up the moment your dog is ready to start her day; it is not necessary to feed your dog because she is barking at an empty food bowl; and it is not necessary to let your dog out into the yard 20 times a day when she barks at the door. When in doubt, ask yourself this question: "Who is leading whom?"

Effective leadership is more than teaching your dog commands. It involves affection, caring, devotion, protection and trust. You have the right to expect your dog to respect and obey you, but your dog has the right to kindness, good nutrition, shelter, companionship, health care and adequate exercise and play. You are a team and your special bond is mutually beneficial.