

A Little Goes a Long Way

The vast majority of domestic dogs are well-mannered family members at home and good canine citizens in the community. Their behavior is the product of a complex interplay between genetics and environmental influences (including health care, nutrition, and relationships with other dogs and people). There is little doubt that human actions and reactions can influence a dog's behavior-both positively and negatively. When our dogs behave well, we can take some of the credit. And when our canine companions don't behave so well - when they "act out" - we have to look at how we influence their mischief-making. But don't feel too guilty - minor alterations in your behavior can have a positive impact on your dog's behavior.

Even the subtlest human behavioral cues can reinforce good manners or exacerbate behavior problems such as *dominance aggression and separation anxiety* (which usually manifests itself as excessive vocalization, inappropriate elimination, or destruction of property in the owner's absence) (See YOUR DOG, "Home Alone," Vol.1, No.2, September 1994,pp. 1-3). "But because both genetic and other forces are at work, people aren't entirely responsible for either good or bad behavior in their dogs," emphasizes Dr. Nicholas Dodman, professor and director of the Behavior Clinic at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine. The totality of a dog's genetics and environment produces canine behavior-for better or for worse. For example, a dog born to temperamentally sound parents, socialized fully with other dogs, and nurtured carefully by its human stewards has the potential for "greatness" as a family companion. But a different mix of "ingredients" is likely to produce a different behavioral outcome.

CONSISTENCY IS KEY

We all know that many dogs and owners communicate with one another as if they were members of the same species. (How many times have you waxed philosophically with your dog, and how many times has your dog "talked" you into a game of fetch with a playful yip and its familiar play bow?). Such "sixth sense" communication often leads to intense emotional attachments between dogs and their people. (Not surprisingly, psychologists have noted elements of "significant other" or parent-child relationships in intense dog-owner relationships.) But along with these powerful attachments often come some of the same "ups and downs" you see in a human family. And these ups and downs can sometimes perplex our pooches.

As we all know, human relationships run more smoothly when behavior is relatively predictable and consistent. And, just like people, dogs become confused by inconsistent or erratic human behavior. But dogs have a lesser capacity for sorting out "mixed messages" than do people. "Behaving inconsistently toward your dog is likely to create a state of conflict in the dog," explains Valerie O'Farrell, Ph.D., a psychologist and animal behaviorist affiliated with the University of Edinburgh's School for Veterinary Studies in Scotland. Dr. O'Farrell says owners who are very loving toward their dog one moment and irritable the next confuse the dog and may set off anxiety behaviors such as compulsive disorders or separation anxiety. (If you're angry or upset about something, try to unwind a bit before interacting with your dog.)

Consistency (not to mention simplicity) is absolutely necessary when obedience training a dog (see YOUR DOG, "Blissful Obedience," Vol. 1, No.6, January 1995, pp.4-6). If you sometimes reprimand your dog rather than praise it for coming when called (which may happen if you're attempting to divert Rover from a canine indiscretion), the dog may think twice about dashing in your direction next time you call it. But such apparent recalcitrance is a normal canine response to inconsistent treatment.

The training commands you use must also be simple and consistent. The command "Sit!" will get your dog's fanny on the ground faster than the metaphysical query "Why won't you sit for me?"

DISCOURAGING DOMINANCE

Aggression is the number-one reported canine behavior problem. And aggression often stems from a dog's attempt to dominate other members of its family (see YOUR DOG, "The Family Pack," Vol.1, No.8, March 1995, pp.4-6). But how does human behavior influence a dog's aggressive quest for "top dog" status?

While some dogs inherit a predisposition toward dominance, Dr. Dodman has observed that "kindly, compliant owners who don't set limits and who identify with their dog more as a person than a dog can encourage dominance." Similarly, in a study involving 50 owners, Dr. O'Farrell noticed increased dominant-aggressive behavior in dogs whose owners were involved "anthropomorphically" with them (*Anthropomorphism* is the tendency to attribute human characteristics or motivations to animals). "A dog predisposed to dominance is more likely to exert that dominance over its owner if the owner gives in to its every demand," explains Dr. O'Farrell.

Early Analysis of a recent unpublished study suggests that people who are driven by feelings (those who "live in their hearts") are more likely to foster dominant-aggressive behavior in dogs than those who are fact or logic-driven (those who "live in their heads"). While it 's difficult (perhaps impossible) for people to change their personality type, just a *few* simple changes in your interactions with a dominance-prone dog can often keep aggressive behavior in check.

Many behaviorists encourage owners to adopt a consistent "no free lunch" policy to modify dominant-aggressive behavior. A dominant dog should get what it wants the old-fashioned way; by earning it. Remember that you have at your fingertips most of the resources your dog wants and needs - food, water, access to the great outdoors, and attention. "With a dominant dog, it's best to supply these things only when the dog promptly and obediently responds to a command," says Dr. Dodman. When a dog is obedient, it is acknowledging that you are in charge.

But this strategic rationing of "goodies" makes some owners uneasy because they feel they are being "unkind." Gently insisting that your dog perform certain tasks such as sitting and staying before eating or going for a walk is not heartless. You have to set such expectations with dominance-prone dogs to establish who the leader is. The average "bossy" dog respects (in fact, prefers) clear-cut directives.

NERVOUS NELLIES

A dog's fear and anxiety usually manifests as separation anxiety or compulsive behavior such as lick granuloma (see YOUR DOG, "Compulsive Canines", Vol. 2, No. 6, January 1996, pp. 4-6). Behaviorists have long observed that dogs that display anxiety-related behaviors are often closely bonded to their owners. Often what happens is that anxiety-prone dogs evoke a doting response from owners because the dogs are very emotionally needy to begin with. (This neediness may be a consequence or early abuse or abandonment.) The owner's doting response "rewards" the dog's anxiety, and as the dog bonds more closely with the owner, the dog becomes more and more fearful of separation from its adored human.

"If an anxiety-prone dog meets up with an especially compassionate person, and they bond very closely, there can be a mutually fulfilling owner-dog relationship-until they're separated." Says Dr. Dodman. An already anxious dog may go "bonkers" when the doting owner has to go out. Rather than curling up for a good snooze, such a dog may engage in compulsive (sometimes self-mutilating) behavior or destructive behavior typical of separation anxiety.

The flip side of this coin is the anxious *owner*. While it's not yet proven, some investigators suspect that anxious owners create (or add to) anxiety in their dog, transmitting apprehension through body language or tone of voice. (Dogs often pick up on nuances of voice and body language that humans miss.)

Veterinarians often recommend various *behavior modification* approaches to reduce a dog's anxiety. But some owners have trouble following through with prescribed programs - often because they involve "distancing techniques designed to put a thin wedge between dog and owner," according to Dr. Dodman. Owners need to remember that modifying their interaction with their dog (which may include a bit of "loving detachment") eventually pays off in the form of a more enjoyable, relaxed life together.

It's also relatively simple to insulate your canine chum from stressful human-to-human interactions that contribute to canine anxiety. On Dr. O'Farrell's advice the owner of a dog that chewed carpeting every time she argued with her teenage son put the dog in a room where it couldn't hear the row. Mother and son continued to disagree, but the dog stopped destroying the carpet.

SPARE THE ROD

The good news is that you can raise a well-mannered family dog and still demonstrate considerable affection toward it - even to the point of "spoiling" it. The key is to treat your dog like the family member it is, while at the same time recognizing and respecting its "dog-ness." Harsh punishment is never necessary and is usually counterproductive. (Getting physical with either a dominant-aggressive or an anxious dog will only aggravate the problem.)

Still, some people find it hard to make changes in their behavior to improve their dog's manners. Hence, owners need ongoing support while navigating their way through behavior modification programs. "It's important for the behaviorist to encourage the owner when he or she had made improvements and to gently draw attention to areas that need more work," says Dr. Dodman.

Remember-relatively minor changes in *your* behavior can create significant changes in your dog. (You don't have to undergo a personality makeover!) If you find your dog misbehaving, try to change some of the small interactions to point your dog in a more "mannerly" direction.

