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Some people seem to think that they need to “be the boss” or be the dominant one to get their dog to “do what they say” whenever they say it, in order to be the pack leader. Well I’m here to tell you, that simply isn’t the case at all. In my view, being the leader of the pack means that you are providing your dog/s with the tools they need to survive in our world. You teach them the rules, how to act in various social situations and provide other necessities of life, without needing to resort to bullying behaviour to get your way. To me, it is totally unnecessary to have a dog that obeys your every command because they are afraid of you or have been conditioned out of thinking for themselves, when the alternative is so much more rewarding and enjoyable for you AND your dog.

By following these simple guidelines you can build a strong bond of trust and respect with your dog while being their Leader of the Pack.



“Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our lives whole.”

– Roger A. Caras

1. Set guidelines

It is our responsibility as dog owners, to teach our dog how to co-exist in the human world with our strict social rules and legal obligations. What would be perfectly normal behaviour for a dog out in the wild like barking, digging and wandering their territory, is seen as unwanted or nuisance behaviour in the human world as it disruptive, annoying and even dangerous. For example in the shire of Rockingham, dog owners can be fined anywhere from \$200 - \$20,000 for a range of different dog offences including excessive barking, not being under control or for an attack on another dog or human.¹

Setting guidelines starts in the home. Make sure as a household, you work out some basic guidelines of expected as well as unacceptable behaviour from your dog and make sure everyone is in agreement. Such rules can include:

- No dogs on the furniture at all or the dog can be invited onto the couch with the “up” command.
- No feeding the dog from the table.
- All humans must wait until the dog is sitting before giving the dog a pat or treat.
- Each member of the household takes turns to feed and walk the dog etc.

It is a good idea to keep the agreed list of guidelines in a place where everyone can see it, like the fridge or family noticeboard and help each other, by providing a gentle reminder if the rules are not followed. It won't work if everyone involved with the dog is not on the same page and sticking to the rules. Make sure you advise visitors of the house rules that might impact them and help them to follow through.

Whether you get a new puppy or an older dog who has come from another home, you will need to provide the specific guidelines for living in your home. Understand that for an older dog, the guidelines at the past home environment may have been different, so take the time to show them the new rules and have patience while they learn. In the case of a puppy, you are now taking ownership of raising them to adulthood and that comes with a lot of responsibility. Their mother is no longer there to instruct them on how to behave appropriately, so this falls to you and your family.

¹ Laws for Responsible Dog Owners Brochure, City of Rockingham

By giving your dog a set of clear guidelines and rules to follow, will provide them with the necessary structure in their life that they need to navigate life in your home and will provide a strong foundation for correct behaviour in the outside world.

2. Communicate

Now you have your house rules done you need to make sure your dog knows about them!

Unfortunately you can't sit them down, show them the rules that you typed up on the computer and stuck to the fridge and explain why you have them or what the consequences will be.



That would certainly make life much easier for you and the dog! Alas that is not the case. You need to clearly let your dog know what behaviour will get them what they want (and you want) and what behaviour is not ok. The way I look at it is this: every time I interact with my dogs, I am communicating with them. That's it. I don't consciously think of it as rewarding certain behaviour or punishing another, it's just communication. I let my dogs know that I am happy with what they are doing or not.

"Over the years I've come to appreciate how animals enter our lives prepared to teach and far from being burdened by an inability to speak they have many different ways to communicate." – Nick Trout

For example if your dog would like your attention, you can let them know what types of behaviour will get your attention and what behaviour won't. It looks like this: If your dog jumps up at you, paws you, mouths or bites you or other unwanted behaviours you would communicate that this behaviour WON'T get them what they want (your attention) by ignoring them, walking away or withdrawing your attention. However (now this part is just as important) you let them know what behaviour WILL get them your attention, when they either sit for you or walk away to lie down or do something else that you want them to do, to get your attention. As soon as they offer the wanted behaviour, you communicate that is what you want by giving your attention.

The quicker you communicate to your dog in any given situation what is acceptable and what is not acceptable the quicker they will learn!

3. Consistency

To further help your dog to learn the guidelines of your home or the types of behaviour you want that will get them what they want, you need to consistently enforce the rules. This includes both communicating “yes” and communicating “no”. Your dog doesn’t understand that they are not allowed to jump up to greet you because you are wearing an expensive outfit, when they are allowed to do it every other time. Or when your dog complies with a command you’ve given and you don’t acknowledge it in any way to let them know they did the right thing. These mixed messages are confusing to your dog and they won’t be able to learn what is or not allowed.

Dogs learn largely through repetition so if you want your dog to learn a particular behaviour (i.e. sit not jump), then you need to be consistent in the way you address the behaviours of this activity EVERY time, no exceptions. This also means that EVERYONE should follow the same rule so you don’t end up with some members of the family allowing a certain behaviour while others don’t. This can also be very confusing for a dog and will make learning the desired behaviour or what is unwanted much more difficult.

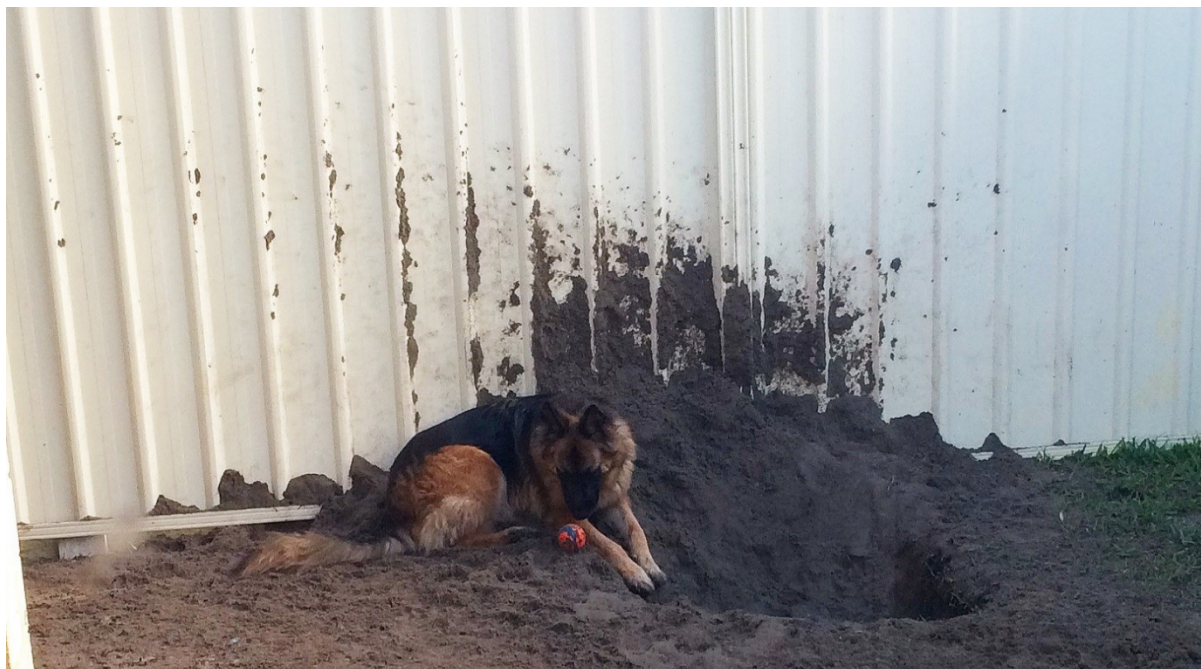
REMEMBER: If you set a rule, stick to it, ALL the time, EVERY time.

4. Be fair

I often hear people say “I came home to a big hole dug in the back yard and the dog knew he had done wrong as he looked really guilty”. Dog’s do not have an understanding of right and wrong in the moral sense like humans so they are not capable of feeling guilt.

So, if it’s not guilt they are feeling, why does it look like it? In part, because we project that onto our dogs as we expect them to KNOW what they did was wrong and to feel bad about it. But in reality it’s because our dogs are highly tuned to our body language, emotions, energy and they can tell when we are angry, frustrated, disappointed, surprised and annoyed (the main emotions we feel, when we come home to property destruction). They are in fact responding to these emotions and are offering calming behaviour to help us and to keep from being in trouble, from what they don’t know.

Dog’s do not have the capability for deductive reasoning, so unless you communicate to them that what they are CURRENTLY doing isn’t what you want, they won’t make the connection.



Back to the hole in the lawn scenario. Your dog could have dug the hole at any time while you were out or not actively watching and depending on how long you were away, it could have been hours ago. They can't make the link between what they did then and getting in trouble now. To them you are being unfair and confusing or at worst telling them off for doing the right thing at that time!

We also tend to tell our dogs off for things we have yet to teach them properly, like getting off their mats when we leave the room (they should know to stay on there!) or for not coming when called at the park or going through the rubbish bin or going toilet in the wrong place. We assume that our dogs already KNOW that these things are not allowed, without having taught them that that is the case. If you catch your dog doing these things, think of it as an opportunity to communicate to them that this is not acceptable behaviour and show them what they could do instead rather than harsher methods of punishment.

And of course make sure you have FULLY trained the activity before you expect your dog to comply!



5. Follow through

As the leaders of our pack, it is our responsibility to maintain a calm environment for our pack members and to help them return to that state after times of high excitement or stress. We have



probably all had a time when playing with a dog (especially a puppy), when the play goes too far and they end up overly excited and things start to go a bit wrong (think biting, barking and becoming uncontrollable). Sound familiar?

There is nothing wrong with play or high energy play either, what matters is helping your dog return to a calm state afterwards.

Ways to do this:

- When playing, always add in calm periods throughout the game i.e. when your dog brings the ball back, teach them to sit or drop before you throw the ball again.
- Supervise play between two or more dogs and step in before the play escalates too far and allow the dogs involved time to calm, before allowing play to continue (this may include letting the dogs walk away to sniff or have them all sit watching you).
- Teach your dog a quiet cue to use when they bark, so you can help them return to a calm state, rather than getting more and more worked up the longer they bark.

In stressful situations we need to first diminish the stress by removing or creating sufficient distance from the stressor so your dog has the opportunity to relax. This is almost impossible if they are still confronted with what is making them stressed. Help your dog to return to a calm state through massage, play, focus games or sniffing if you are outside.

Ok so this is great for when dogs are excited or stressed, but what if they do something you don't want? When you block a dog from something, be it an item you don't want them to have or from going into a particular area, make sure you keep blocking until they have given up. What I often see is owners blocking their dogs, who then turn away but come straight back as soon as the owner moves or looks away, as they haven't followed through all the way to communicate to the dog that this is a no-go area. This can then turn into a game for your dog and is no longer a learning activity and can have the reverse affect by making your dog MORE interested in the item or area rather than less. (By the way blocking can be achieved by using a physical barrier like baby gate or by using our body to stop access. Blocking does not involve physically touching the dog or harming them in any

way, it is just used to prevent a dog from accessing an area or item). You need to keep the block in place until your dog has completely understood they are not allowed in this area and have given up attempting to approach.

Also, don't forget when you give a command to your dog (like "sit" for example), make sure you are in a position to follow through. This can mean giving the desired reward or following through to ensure your dog completes the required task.

6. Talk less

Huh? What does this mean? If we don't give a dog a command how will they know what to do? This is the trap that many of us fall into, where we think we have to command our dogs to do everything at any given time and that they must do it just because we said so. Now I know there are times when our dogs really do need to do what we say for their own safety and it is important that we teach them commands for these times. What we do need to stop doing though, is over using our commands in situations where they are not required. When we talk to our dogs too much they start to tune the sounds out and will often miss it when we give them a command that we need them to follow. And worse, they start to think that following the commands we give is optional.

"It's no coincidence that man's best friend cannot talk" – Anonymous

Another issue is that our dogs lose the ability to think for themselves and self-regulate. They become unable to produce the desired behaviour if you are not there to tell them what to do. This is unfortunately evident in some show or obedience trial dogs that are trained in certain activities at the command of the handler. When faced with other activities like being off lead at a dog park, they often don't know how to act and stay by the handler as that is what they have been taught to do. By encouraging your dog to think for themselves, to think about what behaviour will get them what they want in any given scenario will help train your dog to think rather than react and thinking is **ALWAYS** better.

Make sure that you use your words wisely and avoid giving commands to your dog just for the sake of it. I'm sure you've all heard the story of the boy who cried wolf . . .

7. Patience

Wait, don't skip this one! I know it may not seem like much, but this is one of the most important (if not THE most important) points on this list. EVERYTHING you do with your dog will be improved with a little patience. Patience to give your dog a chance to do what you ask, patience to take the time to fully teach your dog a new skill before you expect immediate compliance, patience to look at your dog and pick up on all the physical clues and communication they are sending you about how they are feeling and the patience to put their needs ahead of your own. Have the patience to wait your dog out when they are over excited until they have calmed down, have the patience to take the time to properly prepare for going for a walk instead of rushing out the door and have the patience to let your dog figure out for themselves what will work to get them what they want. Dogs learn better that way.

This point has had a particularly strong impact on my relationship with my dogs and it is something that I talk about with each of my clients be it through one of my training classes or one-on-one sessions. Our lives are so busy and we are rushing from one activity to the next to make sure we get everything done before we head to bed, before starting it all over again tomorrow. This can cause havoc on our dogs elevating their levels of excitement or stress which can not only result in unwanted behaviours but living with these emotions is unfair on your dog.

If we let them, dogs will help us to practice patience and to live in the moment.



8. Play

Playing with your dog is one of the best activities for building a strong relationship and bond. I'm sure you have seen dogs playing together at the park or in the home and if not, there are many cute video's to be found on YouTube of dogs playing together, as it is a completely natural activity in the dog world. Dogs are social creatures, and play is simply a great way to have fun with your dog.

It is also an opportunity to teach your dog different commands, behaviours and impulse control. There are many wonderful training games (touch, mine/yours, place etc.) to teach your dog skills that can be used in other real world scenarios. Plus you have the added bonus of your dog being completely focused on you and what you are playing. The play activity itself is highly rewarding for your dog, which helps them with the learning process.



Playing with your dog is a great way to break up training sessions, or if for one reason or another you can't get out for a walk, or just for the fun of it. No reason required!

9. Provide the necessities of life

Well sure this is an easy one right? Food, water, shelter. Done. Well not quite. What about their health requirements? What about their safety? What about their mental and physical needs? To me these are ALL necessities of life. Our dogs can't take themselves off to the vet when they are not feeling well. In fact they can't even TELL us when something is wrong. So we must be on the lookout for potential signs of ill health.

We also can't teach our dogs to recite our phone numbers and their home address in case they get lost or wander off. It is our responsibility to make sure our dogs don't get out in the first place, but if they do, that they can be properly identified so they can be returned home. If your dog wears a collar while at home, it's a good idea to attach a tag that has your dog's name and your phone number so you can be contacted if someone finds your dog out wandering. With the changes made to the Dog Act 1976 that came into effect in November 2013 all domestic dogs must be microchipped. This allows vets and rangers to scan the microchip for your details to help relocate missing dogs with their families. To ensure the system works, it is essential that you remember to update your contact details to the microchip company when you move house or if any other details change.

I am not a vet and I am not here to give you veterinarian or health advice. But I want to encourage you to seek professional advice for your dog and to make sure you are well informed. Do you know what's in your dog's food? Do you know when their next vaccination is due? Do you have any toxic plants in your back yard and have you locked away the snail bait? Are there any holes in your fence that your dog can escape from? Providing the necessities of life also means keeping them safe and making sure they are healthy.

10. Mental and physical stimulation

So we all know that dogs need regular exercise. But do you know why? Yes a walk provides physical exercise that they need to burn off energy, as most dog breeds were bred for physical pursuits like herding, guarding, hunting and other physically demanding tasks. Most suburban dogs don't get a chance to do what they were bred for and rarely do they get sufficient exercise in the back yard. But did you also know that going for a walk helps a dog with mental stimulation too?

Scent is the most dominant canine sense and dogs have around 220 million (yes million) scent receptors in their nose (compared to 5 million for humans) so going for a walk where they can sniff and process so many different scents is a mentally taxing activity.



Did you know that 10% of a dog's brain is dedicated to scent?!

A dog can learn a lot about the neighbourhood dogs while out for a walk like which dog is which, what they are eating, their sexual status etc. and they leave similar information about themselves. It's almost like they are adding their own comments to the status updates from the other dogs in the neighbourhood!

The walk is a very important part of a dog's life, but it is not the only way to give your dog the physical and mental stimulation they need.

Other suggestions to help supplement a walk include:

- Food toys and games
- Teach a new trick or make an already learnt skill more challenging
- Play games like fetch, tug of war, hide and seek etc.
- Obedience or agility training
- Specialised training activities like tracking, search and rescue or dancing with dogs
- Swimming
- Or go for a walk in a different neighbourhood or park or beach for a change!

Being mindful of your dog's physical and mental stimulation needs will go a long way to prevent boredom in your dog, which in my experience is a leading cause of behaviour problems in domestic situations. If a dog is bored, and hasn't had sufficient physical or mental stimulation this often results in digging, chewing and other destructive behaviour, that is not only dangerous for your dog, but can be a huge inconvenience and an expensive one too!



I hope you have found this list useful and be sure to check out our Facebook page for more tips, tricks and useful training products to help you to be the Leader of your Pack.

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