



Upper Valley
HUMANE SOCIETY

Small Dog, Big Attitude

By: Meredith Lunn © 2002

Because of their size, small dogs can present different challenges than bigger dogs. Small dogs are famous for having a big dog attitude! They act like they're not afraid of bigger dogs and can start trouble. But that's not all. We often think that because they're small, we don't need to have the same expectations of them as we would our big dogs. We see them as perpetual babies that never grow up, but that is in size only. Other times we don't realize that their size can be a danger to them.

Here are some things to remember when training and managing your little guys:

1. Jumping up - we tend to allow little dogs to jump up on us and other people. Unlike bigger dogs, they won't knock us over or put huge scratch marks all over us. But jumping up is still an undesirable behavior and an obnoxious one if not managed properly.

Try not to reinforce this behavior. You'll have to refrain from putting your hands on the dog, as this will only encourage him to do it more. It's better to ignore the jumping up and walk away.

However, there may be times when your dog is feeling intimidated by a situation, such as being approached by a big dog, and his reaction is to jump up. In this instance, picking him up is the best thing to do.

When out in public, you need to discourage others from letting your dog jump up on them. Most people will say that they don't mind your small guy jumping up – isn't he so cute after all? Don't hesitate to insist that the dog sit quietly for greetings before he is petted, or turn down the attention if the people are not willing to cooperate. Pick your dog up or just say that you are in a hurry and can't stop!

2. Setting limits - Since their size permits them to be a true "lap dog", it's hard to resist letting them get up on you or picking them up. If they crawl up in our laps while we're watching television, or while we're in bed, we usually let them stay even if they were not invited. However, these situations can cause problems if we don't set limits.

If your dog decides to get up on you and sit in your lap, don't hesitate to put him back on the floor if you don't want him there! If you don't teach him to ask first, he will think that he is allowed to invade your space any time he feels like it. Then when you do try to take him off, he could growl or snap at you. Don't allow him up if he's not invited.

If he is use to being in your lap any time he wants to be there, he may also get protective or possessive if another dog or person comes up to see you. He may growl or snap at them. If he acts that way, simply start to stand up and let him roll gently off your lap. He

will be surprised and probably give you a funny look. Just say "too bad" and walk away. If you are standing up and holding him when he does this behavior, put him on the ground.

3. Carrying him - We also have a tendency to want to carry our small dogs rather than let them walk on their own. If we do this too much, the dogs won't develop independence and confidence walking on their own. You should train your little guy to walk calmly on leash, develop self-control to sit and wait, at home and out in public.

However, if you're out walking him and a big dog comes along, don't assume that the larger dog will want to be friends with him. Small dogs are often seen as prey to larger dogs, not as other dogs. It only takes a second for a big dog to latch on to your small dog with his teeth and shake him, sometimes to death. This can happen even if the big dog is leashed. As a big dog approaches, don't hesitate to pick up your dog till the big one has passed. Your dog may want to let the big dog know he's not afraid of him, so he may posture and bark even if you are holding him. Unfortunately this can invite a confrontation from the big dog. Don't acknowledge your dog's behavior. By continuing to walk away and avoiding contact with the big dog, you're letting your dog know that you are in charge, not him.

4. Play with bigger dogs - If you know a big dog that is appropriate with your small dog, it is possible for the two to play together. Just be sure to supervise the play, watching for changes in body language or attitude in both dogs. Some times the big dog is fine until the energy level goes up and then his prey drive can kick in. Even normal play behavior from a larger dog can be intimidating for your small dog. Don't put him in the position to feel he has to fight back to protect himself, as he could end up not liking big dogs for the rest of his life. Your dog can be inadvertently injured by his larger friend during play, even when nothing aggressive is going on. A large paw on a small back can cause serious spinal injuries. If you feel your dog is overwhelmed or at risk of an accidental injury, always end the play and remove him.

5. The small dog - big dog household - Many of us successfully manage a multi-dog household mixed with small and large dogs. But management is the key for success. The same things that are mentioned above in #4 also apply to this situation. Attention needs to be given to the breeds of dogs you are mixing together. For example, small terriers can be particularly pugnacious and instigate fights. Even if your small dog starts the fight, never let your big dog "teach him a lesson". This encourages aggressive behavior in both dogs and puts your small dog at risk for serious injury or death. Don't perpetuate situations that encourage aggression. If you realize that a situation triggers it, don't set your dogs up in those circumstances again until you have had time to work with both dogs.

Small breed dog - big breed puppy - If you introduce a large breed puppy into your household, it is imperative that you manage the puppy so that your small dog does not get hurt. Remember that the puppy is just that and it could be several months before you can teach him limits with the small dog.

Big breed dog - small breed puppy - Small dog puppies are TINY compared to big breed puppies. You can imagine the size differences when it comes to introducing a small puppy to your larger dogs. Unless you have a particularly gentle and maternal dog, it is better for the two to stay apart till the small breed puppy is older. Having the two separated by a gate can let them get use to each other by watching and sniffing through the gate. Short, well supervised introductions are recommended.