



Upper Valley
HUMANE SOCIETY

Who's in Charge: It's All a Question of Leadership

By Dee Ganley and Nancy Lyon ©2002

Creating an enduring friendship between your dog and your family depends on your humane leadership. Rowdy, bratty, pushy, mouthy and just plain obnoxious dogs need us to establish rules, which will be reinforced with food, affection, attention, and play. Dogs learn very quickly that certain behaviors bring certain rewards. To learn good manners dogs need consistency regarding what will be reinforced and what will not. Because we control the resources we must be the leaders.

So how do you establish your leadership? Everyone in the family should understand that your dog must “earn while it learns”. This means that there is no free lunch for your dog. Your dog needs to earn everything – and we mean everything! Pats, praise, food and toys are your dog’s paycheck for learning to be a good citizen. Don’t put your dog on welfare by letting her live on handouts – make her a proud member of the family by earning the food and play she wants and deserves. This is NOT about establishing dominance, it’s about leadership. You aren’t being dominant by withholding what the dog wants. Instead you are helping your dog develop a cooperative work ethic by creating the jobs (obedience behaviors) that will earn the attention, food, or play she desires. Dogs need to earn what they get – just as we do. Otherwise we turn them into beggars when all we every wanted is a friend or partner.

How does this work? You will only notice and reward those behaviors you initiate. For example, if your dog drops the ball at your feet wanting to play, don’t play. Play is always initiated and carried out only by you. It must be your idea, not your dog’s idea. If she nudges you for a pat on the head, she doesn’t get one. She only gets patted and rubbed when you decide the time is right. All activities – meals, going outside, play, even attention, are initiated by you. In addition, the dog must complete a simple obedience command before you allow her to engage in any of these activities. Request a sit or a down before dinner, going out, playtime, or any activity your dog likes. You must go through doorways first. Use your body to block the dog instead of sit/stay command. The body block is easy and is in the dog’s own language. As you open the door and the dog tries to push past you, simply move your body to block her. Continue in this fashion until she looks up at you in expectant attention and understanding. When she hesitates and looks to you for the “cue” to pass, then release her. If the dog is going outside, just open and close the door without letting her out. When she finally looks at you and steps away from the door, reward her with a treat, or by letting her out. Do this consistently so she learns she must wait for you to say okay, and not simply rush through the door.

If you put your dog on the payroll, and are consistent, she will learn that all good things and all necessary things come from cooperating with your requests. All you ask of her is cooperation, which is well within her abilities. You will impress upon her that you make the decisions in this house because you control the payroll. The “tougher” the dog the more necessary and effective a “no free lunch program” will be. And best of all you will have created a loving, loyal partner without having to lift a finger, scruff of a neck or raise your voice. Not all dogs require 100% “no free lunch” – but most can benefit from being on the payroll at least part time.

Here are some more 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 could 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 or 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 her 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.

Feeding your dog is your choice not your dogs! (Don't reinforce a dog who is barking at you to feed or play with her.)

Ask your dog to sit and wait before eating, rather than allowing her to dive headfirst 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 heed 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.