

Leadership tips for avoiding or alleviating minor behavior problems

Written by Jeff Coltenback

1. Leaders initiate. No matter what the interaction, it is best to assume that leaders initiate. For instance, if the dog come to you and nudges your hand, and you pet the dog, the dog just initiated that interaction. Consequently, you potentially submitted to your dog. This rule goes for many things. Another example is the dog that brings you a toy and you then accept the initiation of play and engage in play. You just submitted to your dog. The dog is controlling social interactions. Leaders initiate. The correct response to this is to ignore the dog under these and similar scenarios. You should initiate all interactions with your dog and ignore all of your dog's attempts at controlling you (ignore also means no eye contact).
2. Resource Control is crucial in keeping your dog working for you. Either your dog is working for you, or you are working for your dog. All resources should be controlled by you, the leader. Food, treats, affection, play time, going for walks, toys, etc are all resources that the dog should earn by performing obedience and other commands for. For instance, before you leash your dog to walk, make him or her sit. Before you feed or offer a treat, make them sit. If they catch on and start offering sits, this is good. However, always go a step further and make them do something. If they are already sitting, make them down, etc.
3. All day long you are doing 2 things. You are either rewarding or correcting behaviors. Good or bad, you are shaping your dog. So, be sure to reward only good behaviors. We often make the mistake of inadvertently rewarding bad behaviors. If the dog jumps on us, it may be acceptable at times and then not acceptable other times. This is not effective in training. A behavior is either acceptable or it isn't. Not all dogs require such consistency. But, it is better to err on the side of caution and just never reward bad behavior. The same holds true for good behavior. Always acknowledge, positively, good behavior.
4. Have multiple training sessions with your dog every day for the rest of his or her life. Have about 3 sessions every day for at least 2-3 minutes per session. Doing these quick hits throughout the day keeps your dog working for you. I recommend 1 session that is treat-based (use treats as the reward). Use another session for verbal and physical praise only. Then use the other session for a quick game of play using a favorite toy. Have your pet perform obedience commands so they work for different resources during each session. Of course, feel free to extend the sessions if your dog is up for extra work. If so, a play session would be most appropriate so you can exercise the dog as well.
5. Walk your dog, not just around the block either. Your dog has an innate desire to travel. Walking satisfies one of the dog's most instinctive needs. It also gives you the opportunity to take control of the walk and further take control of your dog. Your dog wants a leader. Leading your dog on a walk is another great tool at your disposal.

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Disclaimer: The suggestions above are not intended to replace professional or veterinary care. Always seek the counsel and services of your veterinarian or pet professional for your pet's needs.