



ARE YOU YOUR DOG'S BEST FRIEND?

by Lisa McCluskey

Simple ways to build a strong relationship with your pet

As a trainer I am often asked how to 'do nothing' with a dog but yet enjoy its company. It can be difficult at times to balance work, children, a home and yet take time off to enjoy your pet. Some owners feel guilty that the lack of quality time can result in degradation of the owner-pet relationship. For those of you who are juggling all these responsibilities, the good news is that you can spend time with your dog "doing nothing," and yet benefit your pet, yourself, and the relationship you strive to develop.

First of all, we must look at the current relationship you have with your dog. There is an exceptional article written by the world renowned canine trainer/behaviourist John Rogerson entitled, "How does my puppy learn?" This invaluable information can be easily located on Mr. Rogerson's website at

johnrogerson.com. For those of you thinking, "I have an adult dog, it is too late to look into these things," it is never too late! On average, the dogs in our classes range from three to eighteen months of age, but we regularly have dogs up to fourteen years of age enrolled in our basic training that excel at the methods this article outlines.

John Rogerson advocates sitting down and really pondering the relationship you have with your dog daily. For example, "Name five things, in order of importance, that your dog would choose to play with if he were given a free choice in the matter; name five foods, in order of preference that your dog would like to eat if given a free choice; what form of physical attention does your dog like the most (stroking, cuddling, patting, tummy tickling, or scratching); name five places your dog would like to go if a free choice was given and what would he choose to do when

he arrived; which words or phrases start your dog's tail wagging happily and which words or phrases cause a lowered tail, ears back, looking sorry for itself expression?" Some may find these questions silly, but as a dog trainer, I find these questions particularly poignant in helping my clients with their dogs daily. Examples of concern include: if your dog does not play; chooses to play by himself without you or with another dog; that he could not care less about the food you provide or if you physically interact with him; that neither of you have any hobbies that you share and engage in together and/or your dog seems to be deaf to the words you use to communicate with him on a daily basis. If these descriptions apply to you and your dog, I would then know that you may require relationship building exercises to work on with your canine before you embark on the training exercises outlined in this article.

Therefore, at my first class with my new stu-

dents (humans only orientation lecture) I emphasise the importance of analysing these five questions before continuing on with the course that the clients have paid for and hope to succeed in with their pups. Once you are able to answer all of Mr. Rogerson's questions affirmatively, then you are ready to begin these simple exercises and "do nothing with your dog without guilt." Below is the homework which I require my clients to work on with their dogs before arriving at the second week of class with their dogs:

DO YOU HAVE PRAISE WORDS?

Integrating praise words when you pet elicits the correct behaviour is imperative. Your dog needs feedback that he has accomplished what you have asked him to do. Choose words that are easy to remember (Yes, Good, Good Girl/Boy, Perfect, Excellent, Nice, etc.).

DO YOU USE A RELEASE WORD?

The release word lets your pet know that the exercise is done and he may now go back to doing doggie activities that he wishes to do (sniffing the ground, hanging out, etc.) Try to choose a word other than "okay" (Go Play, Free, All Done, At Ease, Release, etc.).



THE GAME TO REINFORCE EYE CONTACT/CHECKING IN:

You need your dog to make eye contact with you when you are interacting with him. If your dog learns that when in doubt, make eye contact with my owner and I will be rewarded, he is less likely to take matters in his own paws (lunging, barking, whining, etc.) when he experiences things in his environ-

ment. The "game to elicit eye contact" teaches your pet that distractions are unavailable to him when you are interacting with him. This makes for a more enjoyable relationship with your pet.

Restraining your pet on a short lead, hold his treats or toy out to your side away from him. He will try to get to the reward (treats/toy). Just hold the reward in your fist until he stops looking at it. The second he makes eye contact with you, use your praise word (marks this behaviour as correct) and reinforce him with the reward in your hand. Your arm can extend in different directions, but your pet must stop looking at the treats/toy and look at you to get the reward. This teaches your dog to focus on you when he wants something in his environment and that if something is unavailable to him, to look to you and you may make it available. When you are finished practicing, say your release word and walk away.

DOES YOUR DOG'S NAME MEAN LOOK AT ME?

You need your dog to make eye contact with you before requesting an activity from him. If your pet is not looking at you when you ask him to do something, the likelihood that he

will carry out the task significantly decreases. Always use your pet's name in a positive way (refrain from calling his name and acting displeased or proceeding to yell at him). Work to say your dog's name during the "game to elicit eye contact" as he looks at you. This will build a strong association between your dog's name and focusing in on your face for more information about the task at hand.

HAVE YOU TAUGHT "SETTLE"

OR "RELAX" AS AN EXERCISE?

Daily, you must work on your pet being friendly towards being examined and touched all over his body by humans. Use the word "settle" or "relax" coupled with soothing tones and a smooth petting motion when your pet is sitting, lying down, or lying on his side. Slowly touch ears, feet, tail, body, and teeth while incorporating your request word.

REMEMBER FOR FUTURE REPETITIONS:

Repeat all tasks in different locations, with all family members, on different surfaces, at different times of the day, remembering to praise and have fun with your canine companion.

So there you have it! The progression of exercises builds to being able to teach your dog to "settle" or "relax" on command. How wonderful to have a way to communicate with your dog to just calm down and allow you to pet and stroke him while watching television, talking on the phone, visiting with guests, reading a book, etc!

The methods above utilise clear communication and reinforcement to teach your pet to just "do nothing" and be content with it. Though we always need to fulfil our dogs' daily exercise needs, we know that when we are done interacting with our dogs, we need a way to let our dogs know to just take a breather and spend some quiet time with us.



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