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OBEDIENCE TRAINING AND OWNER EDUCATION

How important is obedience training and owner education? Essential! In fact, training is the biggest factor in whether an adoption succeeds or fails.

When we talk about training, we don't mean just having a trainer teach sit-stay-heel. We mean: YOU as the owner learning about dog behavior and training, and then YOU teaching and guiding your dog with patience and consistency so that he learns how to behave in a world of humans.

Dogs are pack animals who need leadership and rules to survive. Training will make your dog a trustworthy, socialized family member and forge a bond with your dog. Group classes teach you how to communicate with your dog despite distractions, and your dog will benefit from this socialization opportunity. The more socialized your dog, the more places you can go together. All family members should participate in training and agree on the rules, so they can teach the dog with consistency.

Think positive: Get recommendations for a class taught by a professional and based on positive reinforcement. Talk with the trainer and observe a class first to ensure the trainer uses humane techniques. The facility should be clean inside and outside.

Be patient, firm and consistent: Reward good behavior. Small edible treats work well; always accompany them with verbal praise and positive body language. This is reward-based training.

Timing is essential: Correct immediately when an unacceptable behavior occurs, not afterwards, then praise enthusiastically when your canine modifies her behavior.

By correct, we mean a quick yank of the leash, immediately letting it go slack. Some people find spraying water, shaking a can of pennies or tossing a small sack of rattling items (such as beans) effective in disrupting a behavior. However, these aversive techniques should be used to interrupt the dog's action, not as punishment - and they work best when you successfully conceal the fact you are causing the noise. It's better if the dog thinks his own action caused the surprise noise, spray or the landing of the rattle-sack. Never toss the sack at your dog, just in the vicinity of his misbehavior. And it's meaningless to throw it after the misbehavior occurs. Again, timing is key.

Ignoring can be the best medicine: Many modern-method trainers advise to ignore misbehavior such as jumping or grabbing at a sleeve. Instead, turn away - then praise and reward as soon as your dog calms down. Take that opportunity to instruct the dog to engage in a positive action such as "sit." Dogs thrive on attention; often dropping behaviors that don't pay off - while looking for ways to gain attention.

This is a big reason why young dogs run off with shoes. (The other reasons being that they like things that carry their people's smells.) He knows that you'll come looking for the shoe, and give him attention. Most dogs, similar to children, prefer negative attention to no attention at all. So try to remove the opportunity by putting away shoes and your other personal items.

Give a verbal command only once - if the dog doesn't respond immediately, firmly put her in the position of the command (i.e. "sit"). Repeating commands ("sit, sit, come on, sit, sit, SIT...") means the dog has not learned "sit" means sit.

And don't issue a command unless you are in a position to enforce it. For example, don't say "come" unless you have a long-line attached to guide him to you if your dog is not yet reliably complying. If you don't enforce a command, you are teaching the dog that listening is optional.

Another common pitfall is combining commands. "Sit," "down" and "come" are distinct and important commands. "Sit-down" and "come on sit" aren't. Be clear.

Once you have your dog reliably responding to a command, start practicing the command in situations with distractions, recommends trainer Eric Lundquist. When you and your dog have accomplished that level of difficulty, it's time to generalize the response to other locations and people. For example, your dog may be great at sit-stays in your home. Now take him outside with several neighbors present.

Learn everything you can - it's worth every penny and every minute because your whole family will benefit. Each dog is different, so it may take more than one approach to solve a problem.

Remember: obedience class is more for you than the dog. It teaches you to train your dog. It teaches you how to be alpha, how to gain your dog's respect and obedience, and how to help your dog to live in the human world.

All family members who are old enough to interact with the dog should participate in training. Obedience commands need to be practiced and incorporated into your daily life. Certain commands, like "down-stay," can be invaluable in the house and a life-saver when out in public.

Practicing obedience also gives dogs a terrific outlet for their physical and mental energy. A well-trained dog can go more places with you. And a dog who's secure in his place in the family pack is happy to let his human be the leader.