

## Top Dog: A canine behavior series.

This is the first of a series of canine behavior articles. Why trust a veterinarian on behavior issues? There are two reasons. The first is that veterinarians see dogs at their very worst, when they are frightened, painful, and often protecting their owners. Behavior modification techniques that work under such stressful situations are sure to really shine at home. The second reason to get a veterinarian's point of view on behavior issues is that underlying health or genetic causes drive so many behaviors.

When you would like to induce a behavior from your dog, there are a couple of questions you should ask yourself. Is this a behavior that would be seen in the wild? In other words, can a wild dog family teach a member of the pack this behavior? If so, your best training method will resemble the pack's training method. At what age does the pack teach members this behavior? Puppies in the wild learn the social structure of the pack in their first few months, and hunting skills for the rest of their first year. With that in mind, it would be logical to assume that the best time to teach your dog his proper place in your family would be early on, certainly before 16 weeks, whereas complicated hunting, retrieving, or herding skills will be better understood a little later on.

If your dog does not know his proper place in your "pack", you can teach it to him, regardless of his age. It will be easier if he is under 16 weeks of age, but it is never impossible. As we go through this series of articles, the training methods that reinforce your "alpha" status, as well as teach the dog some specific behavior, will be pointed out.

Let's talk about how your dog greets strangers. When you take your dog for a walk, does he assume that every new person or dog you meet exists just to pet him or play with him, or does he growl or lunge at strange dogs and people? Without input from you, your dog will fall back on his genetically programmed response to strangers. In other words, most Labradors will cheerfully and enthusiastically greet strangers as if they were long lost friends, while many terriers will threaten anything that moves. That is, however, assuming no input from you. You can train your Labrador to guard you from every creature that approaches (I don't recommend it), and you can teach your terrier to respectfully greet people, and play nicely with other dogs.

Think about a wolf pack. Let's say a pack sees an unfamiliar wolf approaching them, on their territory. The subordinate wolves are going to look to alpha wolf in regards to how to behave. If alpha wolf says, "Hey, that's my brother! It's been a dog's age since I've seen him!" and his tail is up, his ears forward, and his face relaxed, the approaching stranger will get a cordial greeting from the whole pack. If alpha wolf says, "Intruder alert!" all the subordinate wolves will prepare to help defend the territory.

You are (or should be) alpha dog in your family. As such, you can alter your dog's reaction to strangers by giving him input every time you encounter someone. This means consistent praise for a correct greeting, as well as consistent punishment for an incorrect greeting. Your praise should be given in a clear, bright tone of voice. "GOOD dog! Good greet!" Punishment should be a collar correction, which means that you give the dog a yank or a shake by the collar, while you scold him in a loud, low tone. The more your tone resembles a growl, the more instinctive your dog's understanding will be. Dog training is not the time to be self-conscious. It is more important to be clear to your dog, than it is to not have your neighbors hear you training him. Note: this is one of those instances in which the training method itself reinforces your alpha status. Mother dogs will shake their puppies by the scruff of the neck, or grab them there and pin them, for serious transgressions. By disciplining your dog in the humiliating (but not painful) way that a puppy is disciplined, you are telling how low he ranks in your pack.

So let's say you have a West Highland White Terrier that growls and lunges at everybody. (This is the breed known to veterinarians to be most likely to break away from their owners and attack a Rottweiler.) "Buster", your Westie, has gotten so obnoxious that you don't walk him much any more. That is the first thing that has to change. In order for Buster to learn how to behave, he has to have frequent opportunities to practice.

Now ask yourself if Buster is so dominant that he is likely to bite you is he receives a collar correction. If not, fit Buster with snugly fitting collar and a leash that is comfortable in your hands, and out you go. If Buster might bite, first take him to a pet store that allows dogs, and get him fitted with a Gentle Leader, Haltie, or other head collar. These devices attach to the head, and close the mouth when the leash is tightened. Buster will need some time at home to get used to the feel, and convince himself that he can't remove the head device

(a day will do), and then out you go.

Ask Buster to walk beside you, not out in front. The top dog leads the pack physically as well as emotionally, so you are deferring to his authority if you allow him to proceed you. Anyone you meet on your walk, greet in a bright tone. Try to do this at enough of a distance that Buster hasn't started his routine. Then proceed closer until Buster utters the first growl. For the first offence, one yank on the leash and a deep, loud, "NO" will do. If he stops his aggression, praise him and move on. If he continues, you escalate your anger until he stops. Go to a firm shake by the collar (or the leash if he has headwear on), and scold him in an angry tone. The shake needs to be firm enough only to rock him a little, his feet shouldn't come off the ground. The effectiveness of this technique comes from the humiliation of being treated like an errant puppy in front of the same creature he was declaring himself to be an outlaw to, not from shaking hard enough to cause pain. It won't work the first time, but by the fifth or sixth time, Buster will be anticipating a punishment for his threats, and will be trying to figure out what to do to avoid it. Keep in mind, you may have previously been inadvertently sending signals to Buster that you appreciate his protection, so some confusion is to be expected. When you finally approach someone to the distance Buster would previously have begun his show, and instead he behaves neutrally because he is so busy figuring out what to do next, stop and warmly praise him. Then proceed closer to the stranger. Continue to praise the neutral behavior, and instantly switch to anger at the least grumble from Buster. Very soon you will be able to go on entire walk with out a sound out of Buster. At this stage you must continue to warmly praise his lack of aggression at any time someone is in the range that would have previously induced it. Once again, this is no time for self-consciousness. Provide your dog a positive example of correct behavior with a cheerful greeting to any and all you see, and then keep up the running conversation with your dog about how good he is being, as you go by. Pretty soon Buster will look forward to walking by people and dogs, because of the opportunity to be fussed over for being good. At that point, he might start to look at strangers with just a hint of interest, rather than the studied indifference you have been rewarding. When you see this, stop praising neutrality to strangers, but gush at him for those little ovatures of interest. At first they will be subtle. If he looks at a dog with his ears forward and his tail up (and he is not growling), you praise him. If he wags his tail at someone, you award him the Nobel Prize.

In a process called shaping, you gradually stop rewarding the behavior you have, and start rewarding the next step toward the behavior you want. When you have achieved that next step, you repeat the process, again asking the dog not for the final desired result, but for the next tiny step toward it. When Buster gets safe enough that people can pet him, you can cheat to speed the process. Cut up a hot dog into about 60 tiny pieces, and carry the pieces with you in a baggy. When you encounter someone friendly, hand them the baggy and ask them to feed one of the pieces to Buster. Use the hot dog only for walks. This should be an extra-special treat that he otherwise never gets. If the pieces are tiny enough, you won't upset his tummy or derail his diet, even if you meet ten friendly people.

You can't ask strange dogs to feed Buster, but you can reward him with hotdog for a friendly greeting. Don't start this until he is able to sniff noses with a strange dog (at the end of a tight leash), without any sign of aggression. Then call him back to you, and give him the tiny piece of hot dog. Two reasons to call him back: you don't want the dogs to fight over the hot dog, and you want to teach Buster to come when he is called, even is he is enjoying the society of other dogs. Once Buster turns into a model citizen, you may want to start taking him to the off-leash dog park. The 'call away and reward' scheme makes it more likely that you will be able to catch Buster again, once you let him off leash.