

K-9 Communication, LLC

Milford, Connecticut

Article Library

Below you will find a sample of interviews with, and articles authored by Gus Marnel.

If you have questions regarding the material, please contact Gus to submit your inquiry.

Article 1: Dogs learn from an early age

Dear Gus,

How does my dog learn?

Anna

Dear Anna,

Dogs learn in a variety of ways. One of the earliest ways they learn is through their senses —they recognize the scent of their mother, and that she is soft and warm. Once the puppy is about two weeks old, they can see and hear and begin learning through what is called operant conditioning. This means that they will associate a specific behavior with a specific response, be it a positive response, no response, or a negative response, either by dog-to-dog observation or interaction with humans. For example, puppies gain much of their socialization skills by interacting with their mother and other litter mates. They learn through play what is acceptable behavior and what is not, such as nipping leads to a negative response from mother or litter mates.

When formal training begins, positive or reward-based techniques are most effective. Some that are commonly used are clicker training, where your dog associates the sound of the clicker with something good like a food treat or praise, or just using the food or praise itself as the reward.

Your goal should be to associate the desired behavior with receiving a reward, which eventually will be praise and affection from you. The bonus of using positive training is that your dog begins to associate you with the reward, creating a stronger bond. Another technique is ignoring negative behavior such as begging. However, if using this technique, you must always ignore the negative behavior, otherwise the intermittent reward (sometimes rewarding begging) is a very strong reinforcement of the negative behavior.

Although some trainers use negative associations, such as prong collars or electric training, I do not recommend these techniques.

Dogs also have a genetic predisposition to learning, based upon the breed or mix of breeds involved. Each breed or breed mix of a particular dog is born.

with a predetermined map of specific behavior. For example, some dogs are highly trainable, such as the German shepherd and many retrievers, while others, such as beagles and Chihuahuas are less trainable. As a trainer or teacher, my work involves going through a specific particular check list—what breed, age, sex, level of socialization, particular problems--and then working with the owner to set expectations for what they hope' to achieve with their particular dog.

Generally, they want their dog to walk calmly on the leash, to not soil in the house, to meet other dogs and people properly, basically to be an all-around Canine Good Citizen. When selecting a trainer or teacher for your pet, ask plenty of questions. If you feel that the techniques or psychology of a particular trainer seems abusive or irrational, find a different trainer.

And remember, any dog can learn. The old saying “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks” is not true. I’ve taught dogs as young as 8 weeks, and as old as

12 years of new behaviors. All it takes ‘is knowledge of the appropriate techniques, patience, and time. I hope that this helps you to understand “the mind of your dog”.

Gus.

Article 2: Communication key to quality training

Dear Gus,

I have been working with my dog and a trainer for several months, and I feel that the trainer is constantly criticizing my handling of my dog. Since we are in a group class this is becoming embarrassing and it’s taking the motivation out of training for me. Is this type of treatment necessary and acceptable from a trainer?

Christine B, Orange

Dear Christine,

In my experience, the most important part of training your dog is developing a human-companion animal bond. Many times, “bad behavior” on the part of your pet may just be a lack of understanding of what normal species-typical behavior is, for example, pack dominance behavior. You should have a frank and open discussion with your current trainer about what is the goal of your pet’s training and how to accomplish these goals. For example, if you have a

dominant dog, and you behave in a compliant or “laid back” manner to the dog, you are unwittingly contributing to your dog’s negative behavior. So, the trainer may be focusing on you to try to change this behavior to where you are the pack leader.

Another example is that anxious owners transmit their anxiety to their pet, telling them there is something to be anxious about. So, most likely, your trainer’s goal is to have you become the dominant member of the pack and to give a clear message to your pet.

As a trainer, I have sometimes “picked on” an owner for these types of behaviors, with the goal of pointing out how their behavior reinforces the negative behaviors of their pets. But corrections to the owners should not be done in a way that is demeaning to the owner, just as a correction to a pet should not be punitive. I try to teach my clients how to communicate with their own pets, generally saying the same thing many ways, with the goal of the owner having the ability to communicate with their pet and stimulate their pet in a willing and happy manner. So, I recommend a very -open discussion with your trainer about what he or she sees as the issues with you and your canine companion, so that you can better understand, and hopefully accept what your trainer is communicating to you. If you are not able to reach agreement on the goals for your training sessions, it might be best to work with a trainer where you feel you have a better fit of your human-to-human communication styles.

I hope this helps improve both your communication with your trainer, and with your pet.

Gus.

Article 3: Roaming aggressive dogs make walking yours a challenge

Dear Gus,

I walk my dog daily. Unfortunately, we sometimes run into a small dog that is loose who will “charge” at us, barking, growling, and acting aggressively. Although I can control my dog by having her sit, once we try to walk again, this small dog again will “charge” at us and follow us. It’s very difficult for me to control my dog while walking when this small dog is “charging” at us. What is the best way to handle this situation?

Pat D., Orange

Dear Pat,

There are several issues here. First, the owners of aggressive dogs need to be aware that their dog is roaming and behaving in a way that is unacceptable. I would recommend you approach them directly, but if you do not get cooperation, you should contact your local Animal Control Officer for help. I also suggest, since this has not been a one-time occurrence, that you avoid walking your dog near this dog’s house until you are 100 percent sure that you can control your dog.

This leads to the second issue. The fact that your dog becomes difficult to handle indicates that your skill in handling your dog is suspect. This is an obedience issue. You need to work with your dog to get her 100 percent reliable with “healing” (walking close by your side) without any distractions before you walk her in areas with distractions. Focus drills, where your dog is paying attention only to you, are an important part of the process. I would practice healing first in your house without distractions, then with distractions. The next step would be in your yard or driveway, again without distractions and then when you always have control, with distractions. Only when you have complete obedience on your property would I begin walking short distances, always practicing “heal” with her on a 6-foot leash. She should walk even with your side and sit when you stop. Use praise when she does well and correct her with a “snap” of the lead when she gets too far ahead or lags behind. I don’t recommend the use of the long, retractable leashes, since it is much more difficult to get control of your dog when she is 20 feet away. Although there is no exact solution for every encounter with a loose, aggressive dog if you believe you are in imminent danger, it’s best to unleash your dog.

Since all animals are basically programmed to either “fight or flight” unclip the leash from the collar. Do not drop the leash, since it can get wrapped around you or your dog or even both dogs, increasing the chance of injury. I know this sounds drastic, but your dog, when restrained, has no option but to fight to protect both of you. When unleashed, the dog has the option of flight, which often will diffuse the situation. I hope this helps, and you are back to enjoying walks with your canine companion in no time.

Gus

Article 4: Fearful canine with aggressive issues needs to socialize.

Dear Gus,

Our three-year-old male neutered dog has developed a recent pattern of barking and fear. People that he has happily visited with in the past now seem to scare him. The other day a friend of mine, who has known the dog since puppyhood, was over and the dog started following him and went so far as to rear up on his hind legs with his hackles up. He has never acted like this before. I’m not sure if this is a coincidence, but this behavior began after the death of our 11-year-old dog matriarch and alpha died recently.

Mary Jane, Orange

Dear Mary Jane,

I think that you are correct, and this behavior is related to the death of your 11-year-old-dog. It sounds as though two things are behind this - a fearful personality, and a new need to dominate. With the death of your older, dominant dog, the 3-year-old has now been pushed into the position of being number one, or alpha. He is now acting in the way that he believes is best, which is to dominate anyone else in the household. And showing aggression to someone when his or her back is turned is typical of a dog that is exhibiting fear-induced aggression. Depending on how deeply

rooted this is, it can probably be made better, but I doubt if you will ever have a social butterfly as a pet. Omitting any genetic predisposition, this is or was probably caused by poor socialization when your dog was a puppy. When puppies are not exposed to a wide variety of situations during the critical first 16 weeks of life, they will often remain fearful throughout their lives. And when we have a puppy that is fearful, we often unknowingly reinforce this by keeping him away from visitors (for example, crated when guests arrive) and therefore continue this lack of socialization. Combining your dog's new sense of needing to step up to the "alpha slot" with a fearful disposition is the most likely cause of this aggression.

Unfortunately, fear aggression is one of the most common problems that I see, and not easy to resolve. You may need to seek the assistance of a professional canine behaviorist. In the meantime, the first thing you should do is to have your dog examined by your veterinarian to make sure that there is not a physical component to this behavior. Assuming there is no physical cause, you need to begin a behavioral modification program. You will need to reinforce that you, not your dog, are the Alpha in the household. This will move him back into the comfortable position of number two, or follower, rather than leader. To do this, you must be consistent in your obedience training, and make sure that every command is followed. Never give a command that you are not willing to enforce. If you tell him to sit, don't allow him to ignore the command, even if that is easier for you. You need to enforce the "No free lunch" policy, and have your dog work for any rewards, such as food or playtime. For example, if your dog enjoys walks, let him see the leash, give him the sit command, and, once he has stayed in the sit position for a minute (you can gradually increase this time), put the leash on him and take him for his walk. Your goal is not to be harsh, but to establish your leadership in the household. Give commands in a firm, but not loud or angry tone of voice. Secondly, start to slowly reintroduce him to social situations while maintaining control of him. If he becomes fearful, retreat from the situation, and gradually increase his exposure to social settings. Don't allow a situation to become emotionally charged, because your anxiety will "flow down the leash" and indicate to him that you are not in control, and he needs to be fearful and protect you by taking on the dominant and aggressive role. By being firm and consistent he will begin to understand that you are the leader, and it will take the pressure off him to act as the dominant, or alpha in the household. Remember, be firm, be kind, and be consistent. I hope this helps.

Gus

Article 5: Sometimes dogs need time and space to themselves

Dear Gus,

Our 14-month-old German shepherd has always been "shy". She typically will leave "the pack" (my wife, our older dog, and myself) and lay down by herself.

in another room. This is very different than the behavior of our older dog, which always stays with us, so we are concerned. Should we take any action to encourage her to stay with us?

Fred D, Orange

Fred, based on your description of your dog, I don't see this as a problem, although this is a bit antisocial on her part. If she never rejoined the family (or as you say, pack), was seeking out hiding places or constantly withdrawing, this would indicate a major problem with her socialization. But the occasional need for time apart can be a healthy thing for your dog. I personally own five large dogs, and if all five of them were constantly underfoot, we would all be going bananas!

Dogs, like people, can be introverts or extroverts. It sounds as though your dog is on the introvert side, and needs some time and space alone to recharge and rest. So, I would ignore this issue unless it increases significantly. Give her positive feedback when she does stay with the pack and let her have her space when she needs it. I'm sure she will thank you in her own way for "the pause that refreshes". I hope this helps!

Gus