

Jazz Up and Settle Down

Many owners experience great difficulty and frustration trying to get their adolescent dogs to settle down. Many dogs bark and bounce like crazy when the front doorbell rings. Dogs perform moon loops just because the owner says, “Walkies,” or picks up the dog’s leash. And on walks, some dogs literally explode with activity and uncontrollable enthusiasm at the mere prospect of meeting a person, another dog, a squirrel, or a leaf.

Many owners ignore their dogs when they are calm and well behaved and only attempt to control the dog’s behavior when he is really out of control. Obviously, this is a most challenging way to train. And it isn’t going to work that well. First, owners should practice settling down their dogs in easier scenarios — when the dog is less excited, or even when the dog perfectly calm and relaxed. For example, while your dog is snoozing on his bed, ask him to join you to settle down on the couch. Your dog would be only willing to obey. Then owners should settle down the dog in more distracting settings. For example, when walking your dog, ask him to settle down every 25 yards and by the end of just one walk, you’ll have a very different dog — much more attentive and biddable. Finally though, owners must “confront the beast” and learn how to teach Mr. Hyperdog to settle down quickly and willingly, anytime and anywhere. This is one of the first adolescent exercises that we teach at SIRIUS® Dog Training, because this is precisely what owners have come to learn. In many adult dog training classes, dogs are never allowed to bark and bounce or express their enthusiasm and so, owners can never learn how to settle down their dogs when they are excited. Obviously, we have to allow dogs to bark and bounce in order to practice teaching them to settle down and shush. However, rather than let the dogs be rambunctious at will, we teach the dog’s to be rambunctious on cue.

Interestingly, as soon as we instruct owners to jolly up their dogs and get them to vocalize and jump in the air, most dogs simply stand and stare and observe their owners with some considerable curiosity. This is a classic example of Murphy’s First Law of Dog Training: When trying to teach a particular behavior, usually the opposite happens. With a little encouragement though, most owners quickly learn to teach their dogs to jazz up on cue, whereupon the owners may now, at their convenience, repeatedly practice teaching their dogs to settle down on cue. The jazz-up-and-settle-down sequence is repeated until every owner can get their dog to settle down and shush within three seconds.

Once the owner has taught their dog to perform a “problem” behavior on cue, the behavior is no longer a problem that works against training, instead the activity may now be used as reward to reinforce training. For example, after a lengthy period of settle-and-shush, you may instruct your dog to bounce, circle, bark, rollover, or tug as a reward. After walking calmly on leash, you may instruct your dog to pull as a reward. (Especially useful when going uphill.)

An additional benefit of having activity problems on cue is that you may now instruct your dog to let off steam when the time is convenient. For example, I would always instruct my Malamute to stick his head out of the sunroof and howl whenever we were stuck in commuter traffic on the San Francisco Bay Bridge. In fact, once, during an especially lengthy traffic jam, a BMW driver followed suit and howled back!