

WHAT DO OUR DOGS REALLY WANT AND NEED MOST FROM US?

If we could put together a list of what our dogs really want from us, I'm sure many of our dogs would put tasty snacks and treats at the top of their list! And sure, although these things are nice (and sometimes necessary), that's like a six-year-old child saying he wants nothing but candy for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Our children need so much more from us, and so do our dogs.

So what do our dogs really want and need most from us? I believe what they want and need above all else is a trusting relationship with us. They need someone whom they can depend on to meet their needs and the assurance that those needs will be met. Not only their physical needs, but their emotional, mental, and social needs must consistently be met as well. What does all this involve?

First of all, our dogs need **clarity**. Although they love us dearly, dogs spend much of their lives confused. After all, we often throw out so many synonyms for the same command, aren't consistent in what we allow them to do one day and disallow the next (are we going to permit them to be on the sofa or not?), and say one thing with our voices while communicating something different with our body language. How can we create more clarity and less confusion for our dogs?

Through our **consistency** in our interactions with them. We need to use the same command words and/or hand signals with them all the time, decide on the boundaries and rules of the house and stick to them (and everyone in the family needs to be on the same page!), and behave towards them in an even, predictable manner – not scaring them by flying off the handle when we feel tense or angry. We also need to keep them on a somewhat predictable schedule – Dogs thrive on routine.

Our dogs also need our **patience**. Remember, they are living with aliens – us! They don't understand our language, and they sometimes don't understand our expectations. We ourselves often need to repeat the same skill many times before we get it right, and so do our dogs. They need our benevolent, patient, unfrustrated instruction, even if we have to repeat the training many times!

Our attention: Ever notice how your dog just likes to hang out with you? Often they're content to do just that, lying on the floor beside us while we peck away at our computer keyboard. But just watch how they respond when we reach down and scratch them behind the ears – Our dog melts when I take five seconds to acknowledge his presence. Take some time several times each day to just communicate a little love to your dog – to say "Hey, I really love you and appreciate all you do for me and for so many others" (yes, I really do thank him after each therapy visit he makes), to rub him on his temples, to massage his ears or shoulders, to smile at him, to whisper sweet nothings in his ear, to show him you think he's the greatest dog in the whole world. Before you know it, you'll realize he's giving YOU a little therapy in return!

Besides clarity, consistency, patience and attention from us, what else do our dogs most need and desire from us?

They need us to gently, gradually, and continually expand their world so they can develop the confidence they need to navigate the new and unexpected. In a word, this is known as **socialization**. This is especially important for young dogs, but it is a task that we should continue to build on throughout their lifetimes. This means exposing our dogs to all sorts of new sights, sounds, environments, and situations. Let them see such things as people in uniform and costumes, walkers, wheelchairs, skateboards, and bicycles. Give them the experience of riding in elevators and going through revolving doors. Let them sniff out strange construction equipment, hear noisy trains, and walk on surfaces that are new to their feet. Show them ducks, horses, and children's soccer games. Basically, our dogs should learn that the new and novel is an everyday occurrence, that the unexpected is to be expected!

A balance of work, play & exercise, and rest: Just like us, dogs need a balance of rest and stimulation. Although the balance can be different for every dog, a dog who doesn't have anything to do but sleep all day on the couch is not living a very fulfilling or stimulating life (and yes, dogs do get bored just as we humans do). Conversely, the dog who bounces from the dog park to agility class to trick class to doggy daycare is probably exhausted much of the time, and just needs unstructured time to chill out. We also need to monitor the amount of therapy work we are asking our dogs to do. Again, every dog is different, but realize that doing visits is stressful work for dogs, and we have to be mindful of both the duration and the frequency of the therapy visits we ask our dogs to engage in. More about this in a future article! Being happy and fulfilled is often about finding the right balance – So, how is the balance right now for you and your dog? Might some re-balancing be in order?

You undoubtedly have many other things to add to this list of what our dogs most need from us, such as **good nutrition, mental stimulation, play for the sheer fun of it, regular physical exercise, and ongoing training**. This list is not meant to be all-inclusive, but certainly all of the things we've discussed are perpetual needs of our dogs that we must be willing to provide on a regular basis. Our dogs will thank us for it, their bonds with us will be greatly strengthened and deepened, and they will be on the path to becoming the best dogs, companions, and ministry partners they can be! Now, I have to excuse myself and go spend some quality time with my dog...

