A Social Faux Pas: Kids, Puppies, and Dominance

By Jennifer Sobie, originally published in the Doberman Quarterly

You hang up the phone—quickly, because your hand is shaking. You're confused, you're angry, and you're a small bit worried. The call was from the father of a family who bought a puppy from you over a year ago. He phoned to tell you that the puppy, now a robust and fair sized young adult male, has bitten one of his children. There was more to it than that—a list of things he hadn't bothered to share earlier, like episodes of the dog stealing the kids' lunches, of his taking their toys and running and then growling when someone tried to take one back, of his habit of drinking out of the kitchen sink. But most pressing on your mind is the fact that he bit one of the children.

Very quietly, you whisper "Damn."

A movement catches your eye and you glance down at your feet where your bitch, the puppy's mother, has been curled and sleeping. You see that she's awakened. And instantly, as if you're sending out some secret telepathic signal, she's there for you. She gazes up at you, completely on your side, ready to listen to any grief, ready to comfort you just because you need it. Very delicately, she brushes her muzzle against your pant leg—an entire book of testament in the one touch. You lay your hand behind her ears and rub the satin coat; she closes her eyes and rests her head against your leg. And you wonder, what happened here? Where did the puppy go wrong? How could this bitch produce a biter? You think of the sire, a dog you've

known since he was in the puppy classes, a happy fellow who postures and clowns for the public at shows and fills a place as a cherished family member and running companion at home.

What happened? You picked that puppy for the family yourself. He was full of himself, yes, but friendly and comparatively mild mannered—not the instigator his blue collared brother was—he should have been a good family dog.

You wish you'd sold him to a young couple with a Jeep and hiking boots.

Because you know it's not the puppy. Not entirely, anyway. You know it has to do with family dynamics, and with a dog's natural inclination to take what is not protected or taken already. It has to do with pack behavior.

Why is it that you can make this pack thing work for you, but your puppy buyers can't seem to make it work for themselves?

But you gave them instructions and guidance, recommended books and even a cash rebate for taking the puppy to obedience school. What went wrong?

Why is it that you make this pack thing work for you, but your puppy buyers can't seem to make it work for themselves?

People, puppies, packs, and problems

Why is it? Where do these families go wrong in the raising of their puppies? Part of the problem is ignorance. Ignorance not specifically of dog training, but of the behavior of dogs themselves, of their inclinations and desires, and of those gestures and seemingly inconsequential behaviors dogs may exhibit that an experienced "dog person" can easily read as evidence of a developing problem. It is a fateful misconception to trust that the local dog training club can offer the guidance and insight necessary to deal with the gamut of behavior problems that can develop from a faulty relationship between a family and their dog.

Also, another dilemma that stems directly from the problems of ignorance is a quickness to blame. Too many new owners feel justified in shoveling the blame for inappropriate behavior in their dogs onto their breeder, without looking realistically at the common social inclinations of the breed they chose or at the fluctuating dynamics of a dog/family relationship. Far, far too many people chalk behavior problems such as destruction, antagonistic behavior, and aggression up to genetics. Unfortunately, this reasoning achieves two ultimate ends: it makes the problem the breeder's fault, and it effectively puts a stop to a search for a successful treatment plan for the dog's behavior.

Of course, we also used to believe that epilepsy was a sign of possession by the devil.

Sadly, in a very real sense, dog behavior consultation is still in the dark ages in a great many places across our country; there are far more people unfamiliar with effective and successful severe problem behavior mediation in dogs than there are those who are familiar. Moreover, not only is there a dearth of correct information on behavior intervention, there is actually incorrect information readily available in an amazing number of otherwise sound and beneficial dog books on the market.

The wrong answers

Bad books? You read books. You read more dog books than any puppy buyer you've ever met. Why is it then that even though you're subject to all this wrong and misleading information, you are still able to make this pack thing work for you—but your puppy buyers can't seem to make it work for themselves?

The answer lies in that no relationship follows one simple and strident rule. Effective leadership stems from an attitude that brings with it a certain overseeing of all interactions between the dog and his family—a tolerance of "doggy" behavior and an intolerance of pushy behavior. The truth is that no matter what you do with your dogs that you might have read in a book somewhere, you're also augmenting those techniques with your day to day care of your dog, care that molds his relationship with you. For instance, even if you don't think about it, you know that a relationship is a complex thing and is built of far more than one or two physical displays of control. This wisdom is no small thing. The elements of information that a perceptive dog owner learns through many years of experience are so diverse, and so often apparently inconsequential, that it is a task beyond the scope of most trainers to even begin to impart it to new owners. OK. Then, next question: Why is it that dog books are written by dog people, and yet contain wrong information?

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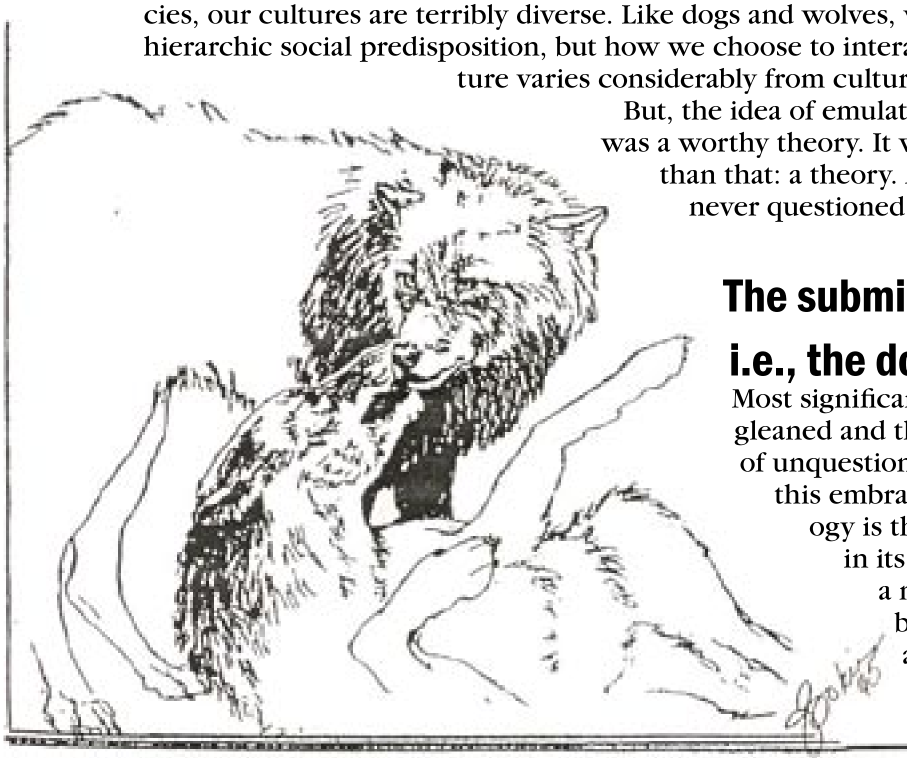
The problem here isn't of sinister intent and it isn't the government's fault. The problem is ghosts. Our dogs are beset by the ghosts of their wild ancestors. Once man started studying wolf behavior, people began to notice the closeness in appearance and social behavior between the wolf and the dog. They noticed how harmoniously the members of a wolf pack seemed to co-exist, and how reverently the pack leader was treated. From these observations was born the concept of "natural" communication, and the idea that when interacting with our dogs, we humans should emulate the manner in which dogs and wolves interact socially with one another. Not that we thought to pattern our own social behavior after our ancestors: regardless of whether Darwin is 100 percent correct and our primogenitors once walked on monkey hands, I doubt whether you'd find one person who would advocate that we deal with social problems in the same manner that baboons and chimps deal with them. And, while you're thinking about that, think for a minute about the ways that we humans do actually handle our own social interaction. It is relevant to note that within our species, our cultures are terribly diverse. Like dogs and wolves, we humans all share a hierarchic social predisposition, but how we choose to interact within this structure varies considerably from culture to culture.

But, the idea of emulating wolf interaction was a worthy theory. It was just never more than that: a theory. A theory that was never questioned or substantiated.



The submissive rollover; i.e., the dominance down

Most significant of the techniques gleaned and then raised to a place of unquestionable sanctity from this embrace of ethology (ethology is the study of a species in its natural habitat), was a method promoted as both discipline and as a social mediator. It is best known as the dominance down (hence forth to be referred to as the DD), and it entails rolling a dog or puppy over on his back and holding him still until he quits struggling to get up or away. The worth and effectiveness of this technique was embraced with open and enthusiastic arms by both the general and professional public. In fact, it is a hard and long search through the phone book today to reveal a veterinarian who does not routinely advocate the DD to those clients of his whom complain of their too-obnoxious puppies.

Oddly enough, however, records were never kept on the actual effectiveness or even the effects themselves of the DD on a dog's behavior. People just accepted the immediate behavior change seen in some puppies following the DD as proof of the method's ultimate benefit.

In all fairness, the limits of most dog trainers to keep an accurate record on the effects of a training technique like the DD on a particular dog after an extended period of time are very real. Owners do not usually return a year later to relate their failures or successes, and even if somehow word of these results does reach the trainer, he or she cannot be certain that their instructions were actually followed. Books, another vehicle of instruction, do not routinely include a follow-up questionnaire to be completed and mailed to the publisher after a reader has read and practiced the information shared in the book. And veterinarians, the last main source for behavior advice, are not in the business of behavior consultation. The advice that they give is provided as just that—helpful advice. It is not recorded in the dog's chart for future reference, because it is not considered actual treatment. If any connection is made between problem adult behavior and the practice of the DD on the dog as a puppy, it is often assumed that the dog's aggravated adult behaviors are not a result or an exacerbation consequent to the technique, but instead, a manifestation of the behavior patterns that caused the vet to propose the DD in the first place.

The fact is, the DD seemed to make sense; you could see it evidenced in the greeting behavior of adult dogs, and eloquently depicted in the submissive posturing of a puppy to its dam. The method was also introduced in a way that supported it as an alternative to the norm of the harsh corrective measures that were then being promoted. Presented as "natural" and as a means to enter your dog's social inner sanctum, the DD was embraced as necessarily humane and a way to gain the dog's friendship. Unfortunately, it simply was not analyzed before it was put into practice, or even soon after it was put into practice. In fact, most of the awareness of the often adverse effects of the DD was gained in a rather round-about way—through routine behavioral profiles of dogs referred for behavior consultation. It couldn't help but be noticed how many of the dominant-aggressive dogs had the DD in their histories. It showed up like a red flag, and even after figuring variables—like the fact that a dog brought in for behavior consultation is more apt to have been exposed to the DD than the general population of dogs because their families are likely to have taken them through a puppy or obedience class—the indications simply couldn't be ignored. The DD can and often does work to exacerbate social aggression.

The down gone wrong

It is important to realize here that when you endeavor to make use of the DD, You are assuming a great deal. You are first assuming that the dog is emitting certain behaviors specifically to either advance his social position or as evidence of his perceived superior social position. Secondly, you are assuming that the dog knows that he can signal submission to you by relenting in his struggles beneath your hand, and that indeed if he does not relent, he does so to avoid the social faux pas of submission. Sometimes this is true; if a dog has no fear, the dominance down performed by a competent adult can be effective in controlling obnoxious puppy social behavior.

However, evidence testifies that it is not always true. We now know that if the puppy is in any way afraid—and a gravely substantial number of puppies labeled dominant would more appropriately be labeled insecure—the DD works to exacerbate any existing precarious or unstable situation, or even to create a big problem where before there was not one.

The reasons for the disastrous results in these cases are pretty easy to see if you toss the canine social stuff out the window for a minute and think about how you would feel if someone much bigger and stronger were holding you forcibly on your back. If you were afraid, you would not be thinking about losing your social status by crying uncle—you would be thinking that to stop struggling would cost you dearly in some way that had nothing to do with social status. The DD places the puppy in an indefensible position; the fearful puppy commonly responds with behaviors such as biting, snapping and other extreme antagonistic displays, accompanied by a great deal of screeching and by urination—pretty good evidence of great fear. Consequently, the DD accomplishes nothing but to teach the dog a lesson about the threat of humans. The puppy does not learn to submit because he wasn't thinking about social position, he was struggling for his life. The puppy learns instead to be on the outlook for the approach of people, and to snap early so as to avoid the terrifying experience of being held defenseless.

If there are children in the family and the dog is kept as an intimate family member, development of a problem as a puppy grows is not just possible, it's probable.

Is this to say then that the DD works with self-assured, pushy puppies who are indeed caught over-stepping their social bounds, but not with fearful puppies? Well, not exactly. Even though I mentioned earlier that the DD works to obviously change a social confrontation with a dominant puppy, it does not work to establish effective control in the long run. This is especially true in family situations. In the long run, the dominance down actually teaches confident dogs to use force and physical means against humans as an effective means to gain superiority.

Sound fishy? Hard to believe? It is precisely because it's hard to believe that something that appears to work so well in puppyhood could have an adverse influence on adulthood that dog trainers have been ignoring the ramifications of dominant aggression in dogs that have been subjected to the DD. And this has been going on for decades.

The culprit for the "down gone wrong" is made of a recipe that includes a heady mixture of some parts photogenic behavior (inherited behavior specific to the canine species), some parts inherited response behavior, and some parts learned behavior. First you have the ingredient of canine social behavior—an ingredient that permanently influences the dog's view of the world around him. Along with this comes the dog's knowledge of subordinate or dominant canine gestures. Next, you have respondent behavior and emotion. And lastly, you have the effects of learning and reinforcement. Begin then with an arrogant little black and tan male pup, born pushy (dominant behavior can be distinguished in puppies as young as 48 hours), and bolstered with his experiences of stealing food or effectively keeping toys, etc., from his 11 brothers and sisters throughout his litter days. Don't forget his experiences with his mother; those times she slapped the little tyrant to the ground and held him there until he fawned in deferential acquiescence. Next toss in an adult human, self confident and physically superior to the puppy. Don't disregard the fact that this person is also a companion and provider to the puppy, and is accepted and even trusted.

Move then to the scenario: the puppy snatches an unguarded docksider and dashes off to his corner, waving the thing as a prize; the human follows and grabs the shoe away; the puppy growls and shows his not-too-terribly-impressive set of little needle teeth; the human snatches him up, flips him about and pins him to the ground, the puppy growls and struggles in puppy incredulousness but does not manage to gain release, the puppy gives in; the human lets him up.

So what is the outcome? Well, the puppy is impressed. An impression has been made that someone besides his mom can “win” over him, and an impression has been made that humans engage physical superiority. It can come as a great learning experience for the dog to discover that physical dominance is as effective with humans as with other dogs. Statistically we are seeing that, ultimately, the puppy will use this information to dominate humans less strong than he.

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The pitfalls

The first and perhaps most obvious flaw in the DD is the fact that while dogs might have been wolves and might still be wolves (recent research has revealed that dogs and wolves share an identical mtDNA code—genetically speaking, they are the same species), we are not wolves. Because we’re human, though we are capable of simulating some interactions, our executions are almost always imperfect. A person might be able to emulate the apparent principle behind those posturings of ranking pack members that lead to active submitting by subordinates, but he or she can’t reproduce the eloquence—we must do it awkwardly, with hands. And that’s the least of the liberties we take when we perform the DD; we also hold the dog down for great lengths of time, and we force the dog to comply. In any functional pack, dominant posturing is answered with voluntary submissive displays that last as long as the dominant member allows them to continue before walking away with an air of haughty arrogance. The performance is not a means to establish your position. No one measure, particularly one so physical and impersonal, can change a dog’s mind about his station in life or establish a harmonious pack hierarchy.

You won’t develop a dog who is afraid to show new behaviors or a dog who’s pride in himself has been nipped; you’ll develop a dog who is self-assured, who thinks it’s most fun to work through you instead of over you, and who simply asks before he takes what he believes is yours.

Another problem is that nobody seemed to stop and think about what actually could be gained from a completely successful execution of the DD. Nobody seemed to take the time to stop and think about the fact that our goals for our relationship with our dogs are not the same as would be those of another dog. Nobody seemed to really take stock of the relationship between the posturing dominant and the submitting subordinate in a wolf or dog pack. For instance, apparently no one bothered to notice that males do not make their mates submit. Dominant/submissive displays are common between pack members who could be seen to be in competition with each other, but not between those who are teamed with one another. Now, in a canine pack, competition is good. Let’s face it, in the wild, times are tough. There has to be an undercurrent of competition, because the pack leader is going to die within the existence of the pack, and someone needs to take over quick. But we would hope that this isn’t the fate of your puppy buyer’s household.

The key ingredient changes: Dominance vs. dependence

The question we are left with is basic: What do we do? What about families with children? Do we disregard Lassie, Rin Tin Tin, and all the Normal Rockwell pictures hanging in every other vet’s office across the United States, and say that dogs can’t be owned by families with children?

No. Nothing like that. The answer is that we deal with the social behavior of our dogs in a very different way, a way that steers clear of physical manipulation, force, and strength, and concentrates on establishing reliance and dependence. We teach our dogs to respect us and our children for what we are to them: their providers. We teach them to work through us to be comfortable and happy, instead of teaching them that they have to work around us to achieve that goal.

A handy outgrowth of this is that you get a nice companion and you don't sacrifice attitude. Dependence does not kill self-full behavior, it only channels it. You won't develop a dog who is afraid to show new behaviors or a dog who's pride in himself has been nipped; you'll develop a dog who is self-assured, who thinks it's most fun to work through you instead of over you, and who simply asks before he takes what he believes is yours.

Teaching dependence

The first step to success is to be careful that you don't throw the baby out with the bath water and chuck the whole hierarchy concept completely. Dogs do recognize a social order, and dominance and subordination are viable dynamics in any dog's relationship with his human family. I realize that, unfortunately, dominance and its derivative dominate are words that conjure images of force and dictatorship, and, because of this, some people may shy away from any mention of these words in describing dog/owner relationships, as well as form any service toward establishing a social order in their relationship with their own dog. As a member of a task force on service dog training organized recently by the Delta Society, I found myself in a conversation with a colleague who rejected that there was any need at all to acknowledge that a hierarchy exists, and who further felt that the preoccupation with the subject fulfilled not a practical training objective, but rather a need to exert control over our pets. To dominate, legally. Since she had worked with an associate of mine at Auburn on a canine olfactory research project, I was willing and even eager to listen to her theories—until she defended her position by saying that her dog sleeps on her bed and shares her French fries. This was her proof. Apparently it didn't register with her that the fact that she was monopolizing the conversation and withdrawing attention for responses she considered inappropriate might have carried as much weight at her house as the other more obvious stuff, like French fries; some of us just don't realize how powerful is the subtle control we exert. I feel confident still in stating that the fact remains that a social hierarchy does exist in all relationships with dogs. It's really too bad dominance is the best (the only) term that the English language has to describe the upper end of hierarchy.

Next comes the important stuff, the information that will most help you in helping your clients. Hierarchies are not built on fear. Hierarchies are built on success. The pack leader isn't the tyrant, he's the provider. He's the boss and he gets all the perks, sure, but he has to work for the privilege. It is under his direction that the pack moves in harmony with one another and gets things done. The leadership position is one that defines the positions of others in the pack, and motivates those others to function in the hierarchy. In this way, as well as through his hunting prowess and defense of his territory, the leader provides for the others.

And now comes the good stuff. Your puppy people are already doing this providing job for their dogs! They have the means to be most excellent pack leaders.

The only problem here is that, obviously, they aren't. In fact, if you had to describe the relationship you've seen within most of these families, you'd say that not only are the dogs not grateful for their owners' indulgences, but that they actually view their people as waiters put on earth to cater to their every canine whim.

Well then…if the key to leadership is provision but the people are already doing the providing and it hasn't done anything to gain them their dog's reverence, how can you ever hope that any of these family members will attain the status of pack leader? The answer of course is in how they do the work. They have to make their dogs aware of the fact that they provide for him. They have to make him appreciate them.

No more freebies

Once again, it is terribly important to keep in mind that effective leadership hinges upon giving. This is why others choose to follow—because there's something in it for them. But, a good (and wise) leader also makes sure he gets the credit for what he's giving, and he makes sure that whoever is getting is made to work for the privilege. This is precisely the concept that works to loft entire families—kids and all—to positions of respect in the eyes of their dogs. It's the "no more freebies" method of social intercourse.

The technique is very simple. A family can teach their over-insolent dog that he's not quite the high ranking official he thought he was simply by keeping the things he wants and needs from him until he acknowledges a family member and does something for that person. Of course, the easiest behavior for a person to get from a dog is a sit, and so, logically, the payment your clients can ask from their dog is that he sit and stay sitting until he's told he can actually take or have whatever he needs. Again, he's made to wait until he's told he can go.

If a family can integrate this concept into the day-to-day care of their dog, they will subtly but dramatically change the dynamics of their relationship with that dog. Every time they feed the dog, give him treats, let him out, give him a toy, play a game with him, or, with a very arrogant beast, every time they bestow upon him the gift of their affection and attention, he will be reminded that the people in his family control his environment. By keeping each of these things out of his reach until he sits for one of the family and waits on that person's signal to take, he'll learn that people are important and to be indulged. He'll learn that he must work through them, as opposed to over them.

Control yourself...

Making the dog wait isn't the end of the story, however. More important is how he's made to wait. The dog must control himself, as opposed to being physically controlled by the owner. He must learn that he gains things through his family members, not that he is kept from things by them. He can only learn this by taking the initiative himself to keep still with no guidance or interference from the owner. This might sound as if the process is complicated or perhaps even impossible, but it really isn't. All a person needs to do is to control access to the reward, removing it each time the dog moves before he's been told he's able, until the beast teaches himself to keep still. It is actually this aspect of the exercise—that the dog control himself—that both makes the interaction so very impressive to the dog, and that makes it possible for all but the very youngest of children to be an active part of the care of the dog.

Teaching Control

Teaching a dog to teach himself to sit and wait for something is a very simple procedure—not one prone to complications by circumstances, personalities, or frightening concepts like a dog's trainability quotient or other mystery factors. The principles involved are the absolutely most basic in learning: reinforcement and punishment. And even if you don't care to grab a text book on learning behavior and impress all your puppy buyers and social acquaintances with your astounding knowledge of learning theory, you can zero in on the basic nature of these two learning principles just by knowing that if a dog finds a benefit in doing something, either because he gains something he wants or because he is able to make something stop that he does not like, he'll do it and do it again (reinforcement), and if he finds unpleasantness in doing something, either because it causes him discomfort of some sort or because it causes him to lose something he likes, he won't do it again (punishment).

The idea in the wait exercise is to teach the dog not to move, and you do that by making moving unpleasant through loss. Remember this is a "wait" and that you have something that your dog wants. Your power is in his desire; if he wants it, he'll try to figure out how to get it. To teach the dog about not moving (waiting), you simply show him what you've got, and then, each time he gets up to grab it, you take the thing away. You teach the dog that getting up causes a loss. This puts the dog in a quandary of sorts, which gives you even more power. You and you alone have the answer to his problem! You control the movement of the goody.

As soon as the dog sits still when you know that he wants to move, you can say "Go!" and indicate to him that he can go get the goody. Aren't you wonderful? Yes you are, and, at the same time, conveniently, sitting is reinforced because the dog gains the goody.

In the waiting exercise, the dog learns that he must control himself. He controls himself for someone, and continues to do so until that person says that he or she is satisfied.

Teaching the sit and "wait"

The best way to help your puppy buyers learn how to teach their dogs to wait is to teach it to one of your own dogs. It's easier to explain something to someone if you've done it yourself. While you're practicing, to make this fun for yourself, pick one of you clan who is both a tad obnoxious or arrogant, and who loves to eat.

Grab a dog food bowl, a handful of kibble, and your dog. Let the dog know that you have kibble on your person, and then put the food in the bowl and set it on a chair or counter or anywhere else handy to you. Place your dog into a sit. If you've never taught him to sit because he's a Specials and the S word makes you very nervous, you can help him into position by standing him on your left and putting your right hand on his collar, or if he isn't wearing a collar, on his chest. Place your left hand on the back of his neck then, and run your hand down his back and against his legs to tuck his rear under him. If he doesn't just plop to a sit, start over and either pull gently up on his collar or push gently back on his chest to take the weight from his front structure, and then tuck his rear. (If you're wondering, no, this won't affect his behavior in the ring. In fact, it might just improve his macho attitude when he figures out that the only place that he gets stuff for free is in the ring. However, I wouldn't use his ring bait to teach this, particularly if it's liver. The scent of liver is quite distinctive, and distinctive smells prompt behaviors in the same way that commands or hand signals prompt them.)

Once he's sitting, switch hands on his collar or chest so that you're holding him with your left hand. (Of course if you're left-handed, you'll want to do all this the other way around, with the dog on your right—the idea is to have your most dexterous hand free to work the food bowl.) Next, pick up the food bowl. Tell your dog to "Wait," let go of his collar or chest, and put the bowl on the floor about two feet in front of him. When he gets up, don't tell him "No" or reach for him. Instead, pick up the bowl. Quickly. Your control of the bowl is your ultimate control of the dog. Then, without talking to the dog or schooling or anything, put him back in the sit and start over. Say "Wait," let go of the dog, and put down the bowl. Don't take your hand from the bowl; you must keep it there so you're ready to snatch it up if he moves.

You'll probably have to do this "pick up the bowl and start over" thing five or more times. But, with each consecutive repetition, you'll notice a change in your dog's behavior. He might get up faster at first (frustration), he might lie down (trying a new behavior), he might begin to wait until the instant you take your hand off from the bowl, or he might start looking from the bowl to you and then back again. You simply need to keep repeating the lesson until your dog sits while your hand is off him and off the dog food bowl Then, the moment this happens, say "Go!" and nod toward the bowl to help the dog figure out that he can have the food now. You might have to repeat "Go" more than once.

Waiting is important for everything a dog might want, so it would be a good idea to also practice this when letting your dogs in and out the door. If one of your guys has ever knocked you aside or stepped on your toes as he or she bolted out the door, you might even find this fun.

Bring the dog to the door and sit him. If your door opens in and is hinged on the left, you should place the dog on your right—or you'll end up forcing him to move before he's earned the privilege simply to avoid the swing of the door. Once he's sitting, tell him to "Wait," and then open the door. A door opening is a prompt that says to most dogs to move, so he'll very likely get up. No problem. Just shut the door in his face. Then sit him back down and start over. Keep it up until you can hold the door open and get through it yourself without the dog moving. Then you can say "Go."

It's easy to cheat on this door thing. Far more people say "Go" when the dog is already moving (bad thing) if they're at a door than when they're in front of a food bowl. I think it's because they want to go out too. At any rate, don't do it. Don't cheat. It might help to know that—and this is the honest truth—Dobermans pick up waiting as opposed to blithely responding to the movement of a door more quickly than some other breeds of dogs (like Goldens). The reason likely lies in that some dogs respond more automatically to prompting stimuli than others. Dobermans, however, weigh odds; they respond not simply because they've responded to the same prompt before, but because it will work out well for them at the time. (Which tells you that there is a silver lining to some things—or at least an irony; this thing that gets them in trouble in a Utility ring will make teaching the wait at the door less tedious.)

Success

I've given the technicalities on waiting, now I'll give the secrets.

The real key to success in teaching a dog to teach himself about waiting is a conviction that you will achieve success. Your dog will teach himself to wait. If you believe, you'll give yourself the gifts of patience and consistency—two elements that your dog needs to receive from you for him to learn. Your dog has to figure out what he can do that will work to get him what he wants as opposed to what he might try that won't work, and you have to help him make the discovery. To accomplish this, you have to be very consistent in what it is you are punishing, and very consistent in what it is that you are reinforcing. You can't get discouraged and change the rules. You must be consistent.

Very consistent, and very specific. You can't be vague about how close the dog can get to the bowl before it is removed or vague about whether you're really going to take the bowl away; you must be certain that any and all movement—a slight lift of the rear, a drop of the head forward in preparation to stand—results in a quick retreat of the bowl. Likewise, if your dog is learning to wait at a door, you must shut the door in the dog's face every time his rear even begins to leave the ground.

At the same time, it's just as important that you are fast and consistent with your reinforcement. If your dog sits there for more than a split second, reinforce his hold of that position! Say "Go!" and motion him toward the bowl or out the door. This part, the reinforcement part, is what gets some people into trouble. The problem is that we sometimes feel as if we need to punish the dog for having tried to move. It seems to make sense that once the dog has tried to move, he has to be even more obedient next time and sit there and be good and think about what he's done for a couple of seconds before we'll let him "Go!" However, the real truth is that the dog never was "bad," he was just ignorant. And, just as importantly, you can't punish a dog, you can only punish behavior; every time you do something to a dog, you are affecting his behavior. If you make a dog wait too long while he is trying to learn this exercise (particularly the dog who is used to getting what he wants by taking it), the behavior you'll end up punishing by making him wait too long is the "wait" itself. If he's trying to figure out how to get what he wants but he discovers that his usual method of lunging doesn't work in this case, when he tries something new, like not lunging and waiting, if you don't reinforce that try immediately, he'll give up on it. After all, it goes against what he's learned so far through his experiences in his life—which is that lunging works best.

The most difficult part of teaching your dog this lesson about waiting is trying not to interfere physically with the dog. It is very important that you remember not to try to stop him from getting up or moving. The truth is, this is the only hard part of teaching your dog this lesson. You'll want to try to stop the dog yourself, but he must stop himself. Your jog is to control the thing the dog wants, making certain he can't reach it or gain it until you say so. The key to teaching a dog self-control is that he learn about the consequence of his actions and not get help in figuring out what he must do to change things. Since you'll be teaching your puppy people this so that they will never have dominance problems, it's important that you practice with your own dog exactly as you'll teach your clients. This means that you can't help your dog by stopping him in any way, even with a look. You must concentrate instead on what it is you have that the dog wants.

Ain't no Stay

The truth is, the dog's self control is so important that it brings up a related issue. The "wait" is by no means a new twist on the "stay" exercise, in fact, the "no moving" part of the waiting exercise is actually incidental—no more than a handy tool for achieving your goal. The important part is the goal, which is to tell the dog "I've got control of all the things you need. You must acknowledge me before I'll let you have these things." You're simply achieving this end through the use of the "wait."

For this reason, if a dog needing to learn something about respect has been taught to "stay," even though capitalizing on this training and telling him "stay" would be the easiest way to get him to "wait," it would not be a good idea. "Stay" is a wise exercise to teach a dog, coming in quite handy in the most varied of situations, but it is far from the best way to establish a dependent relationship between your dog and yourself.

The reason is that a "stay" exercise is taught differently than the "wait" exercise. When teaching a "stay," a dog is stopped physically each time he attempts to move; your control of his behavior is a physical one. It's physical, and it isn't immediately beneficial to the dog himself. In fact, if the dog is thinking about you, he's probably thinking about how he wishes you would go away so he could do what he wants.

However, the control exerted in the "wait" exercise is much more subtle, and its power much more eloquent and practical to the goal of building dependence in a dog. In the waiting exercise, the dog learns that he must control himself. He controls himself for someone, and continues to do so until that person says that he or she is satisfied. The power here is through a creation and nurturing of reliance; you develop dependence through contingencies of desire leading to fulfillment—contingencies of which you are always a key part.

To insure that the dog is not confused or gets to thinking about what he learned in his "stay" training, the word "stay" should be avoided when the dog is being taught to acknowledge his owners through the "wait" exercise. In fact, if he has learned "stay" well, he should be given a new word entirely, one such as "hold" or "keep."

Kids and treats

Families have kids—that's one of the things that get them defined as families—and kids should always be a special priority when teaching a dog about respect. Regardless of what anyone might tell you, a dog cannot be made to believe that children are not juvenile; dogs are an intimate part of a family and they notice all interactions within that family. They know that the kids are kids. But they don't need to take advantage of them. Children can be taught how to make a dog wait, and their subsequent control of the dog will help dramatically in the dynamics between themselves and the dog. For this to work best though, children should use treats instead of the food bowl. Treats work great with kids because they can hold the goodies in their hands. This eliminates the problems of the child not being able to lift the bowl.

It works like this. You give the treat to the child and tell her that it's for the dog, but that the dog cannot earn it or have it unless he does not try to take it. He must be polite and wait until he's told he can have it. She'll close her pudgy little hand over the goody and stand expectantly in front of the dog. Children do not understand that dogs don't speak English, and they trust that their dog will know what they're telling him because the people in their lives do. For this reason, it will work best to place the dog in a sit yourself, and then tell the child to tell him to "wait." Make sure she knows that the dog needs to see the treat, but that he isn't allowed to steal it from her.

Once the dog notices she has the treat, he'll try to grab it. The instant that the dog's head moves, have her close her fist up tight and snatch it high above into the air, away from the dog. She should hold it there until the dog is seated again. She can then lower her hand, open her fist before the dog, and try again.

The dog will catch on. The child will teach the dog not just to sit and wait, but to sit politely, not even reaching toward the treat with his nose. In fact, the biggest problem kids have is not that they can't get the dog to wait, but that they don't remember to tell the dog that he can take the treat when they're ready to let him. But of course, an adult could help here. And don't worry when the kids to remember to tell the dog he can move but they use the wrong word to tell him so. Contrary to popular opinion, it isn't all that big of a deal if the same word is always used as a "Go" word. It only matters that the kids give some signal that the dog can interpret as a release.

Troubles

To make things as easy as possible on your nerves while teaching this exercise to your puppy people, I'll tell you where they'll run into the most problems while they're learning. They won't be thinking about what they're doing. Some of them simply won't be certain of what it is that they're teaching the dog.

All you have to do in those cases is to tell the person to think about what they want the dog to do and what they don't want the dog to do. Remind them that they want their dog to wait, to keep himself still, and that means that anytime the dog keeps himself still, no matter for how long, his choice must be reinforced with "Go!" and the chance to go to the food. Remind them too that at the same time, they don't want their dog to move before they've said "Go," and that this means that any movement seen before they've said "Go" must have an undesired consequence for the dog; that is, if the dog moves, the bowl must be snatched up and away from him.

Trouble Shooting

As a family is teaching their dog to wait for them, they might find that the dog hasn't read this article himself, and he has his own creative interpretations on how things are going to be done. They'll be better prepared to deal with his creativity if it doesn't come as a complete surprise.

Dog's aren't born knowing that "Go!" means that they can move. It might seem obvious to us humans, but it isn't obvious to a dog.

"Huh?"

The most common problem is one that is seen in situations where a dog has tried to gobble the food a number of times when he was supposed to be waiting. This dog has seen his goodies taken from him and has been replaced in the sit quite a bit, and, through these experiences, he has learned that it does him no good to try to move. The problem then is that this dog won't immediately understand that hearing "Go!" changes his situation in any way. When he is finally told "Go!" he'll simply stay sitting there drooling at his bowl with a blank stare. This blank stare thing can be rather a let-down, as anti-climactic as it tends to be. But it's not really a problem; instead, it's an opportunity to teach the dog even more things—things like what "Go!" means. Dogs aren't born knowing that "Go!" means that they can move. It might seem obvious to us humans, but it isn't obvious to a dog. He will have to learn it.

The dog can be helped to learn the meaning of the word "Go!" in one of two ways. The first way is for the person saying "Go!" to simply be patient, and repeat the word every 5 seconds or so until the dog finally moves. Repeating the word won't help the dog with spontaneous deduction, but it will make it likely that he will h ear "Go!" just before he does move. Sooner or later he will connect the two. Another method is for the dog to be gestured toward the bowl with a hand movement as he hears "Go!" This movement will encourage the dog to move. Once he is moving consistently on "Go!" combined with a hand signal, the signal can be faded by gradually lessening the distance the person swings his or her hand toward the bowl.

Sit and go

Another common debacle is that the person doing the training will say "Go!" in that split second wherein the dog gave up on sitting and started to get up on his own. Unfortunately, this will mess up the training because it will change the entire focus of the exercise. Even though the timing was so close, letting the dog get up on his own will reinforce his initiative to take, instead of reinforcing his initiative to please his owners so that he can receive. What will happen is that when the exercise is quickly repeated, the dog won't sit for much time at all. He'll have figured out that to get the food, he needs to sit and then go for it. Of course, just because the beast beats us to the punch one or two times in training doesn't have to mean the end of the world or that he'll take to eating small children, it just means that it will require a bit more time to achieve success that day.

"Go where?"

When first learning to wait, some dogs (particularly puppies) will forget why it is that they're waiting. Their teacher will say "Go!" and they'll spring up and away, and right on past their food bowl. This is a time when you're left with a blank stare. At any rate, the biggest problem with this is not the behavior itself, but the implications of the behavior. If the dog does not want the food, he's probably waiting only because of some physical restraint from his teacher, and restraint will not help the relationship between the dog and his owners in the way that dependence will. The exercise should then be repeated while close attention is paid to the trainer's actions to see what might be happening that is making the dog believe that it's in his best interest to sit still. Once it has been figured out whether or not the dog is being influenced physically, the exercise should be tried with something the dog definitely wants, like a toy, a piece of liver, or a chance to go outdoors.

"I Quit"

Puppies catch on to waiting very quickly, but they often create a small problem for their trainers while learning. Before they've accomplished waiting and being told "Go!" they give up on ever getting the food or they actually forget what they're doing. Once they've had the bowl taken away from them a couple of times because they've lunged at it, they lose interest in the food and they do things like flop to the ground or jump on you or plod off in the opposite direction. In short, they switch their attention to doing anything fun that comes to mind. This kind of thing very rarely happens with adult dogs, but then adult dogs have learned to focus their attention and they've learned about the rewards of persistence, whereas puppies have not. The answer here is to capture and keep the puppy's attention. This can be done by placing the bowl fairly close to the puppy and tapping it with a finger to make it interesting, or even by giving the pup a freebee. Letting him snatch a treat or two will get him believing that he can indeed succeed in getting the food, and it will give him a reason to want it.

"I don't care, I didn't want it anyway"

When a dog believes that he is to be king, it isn't a conviction easily forgotten or abandoned. An overtly dominant dog will learn to give his respect to another, but it won't happen overnight. In fact, though he will likely learn to wait very quickly because he is used to figuring out what he needs to do to get what he wants, he will probably stop waiting in a few days, like he's had some great lapse of memory prodigious to veterinary medicine. In fact, what has happened is that he's beginning to feel the pressure and figure out the story, and he's rebelling. At a time when your average dog would be fitting into the groove and beginning to look to his owners even when he isn't made to dos o, this dog is refusing to hand over his control. The thing to do is to ignore the dog. If he doesn't want to wait, he doesn't get. If the issue is dropped and the dog is left holding an empty bag often enough, he'll come around. He likely won't be found to sit without being told when he sees things he wants (as most dogs learn to do in no time at all), but he'll come around to waiting.

The road best traveled

The Sit and "Wait" exercise is a viable solution to the problem of family dynamics and dogs. Ultimately, as a result of this extra step in the day-to-day care of their dog, puppy buyers will have a dog who chooses to make decisions through each of the people in his family, a dog who thinks of going to his people when he wants or needs something instead of simply taking it for himself. To the dog, the role his humans fill in his life will be very much like that of a good boss to a person on the job: he will look to his owners for what he wants, not simply because he can't get anything without them, but because he perceives that they are his benefactors and that things turn out better for him if he seeks his people for them.

And as a breeder, you'll have peace of mind. You'll have puppy buyers with excellent relationships with their dogs—happy dogs, happy people...and no more harrowing phone calls.

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