

I often joke about how I “don’t do humans.” In reality, no matter what you are training, it’s all about the human part of the equation.

Last spring, Fitz, a year and a half, was the pup in training, and, now, he is out working full time with poultry, sheep and one old pot bellied pig. Our biggest hiccup: he will use the jump gates to pursue a predator, but fails to put himself back where he belongs. I’m working with him to get it right.

Now, it’s Punica’s turn to learn how to work on our farm. Punica, formerly known as “Piggy,” is the newest addition to the team. At only weeks old, she has a ways to go before I start asking her to work. Kids have short attention spans, no matter how many legs they have. I started taking her with me for evening chores. They are brief, and better suited to her short legs than morning feed up. While she is still in with mom at night, it’s her aunts who supervise her current trips.

We aren’t doing anything specific right now, other than her toddling along behind us soaking it all in. She is still showing that sass, and it makes me smile, but the wheels are turning behind those bright eyes, and that’s the important part. I offer random encouragement as we go about our chores, to keep her engaged. At one point, I went through a gate and asked her aunt, Seven, to wait and did not speak to her. Although she could easily fit through, she looked at Seven and then looked at me. When I didn’t respond, she sat next to Seven and waited for me to come back. She’s paying attention.

On one of the trips to get food she got too rambunctious around a group of chicks. Their mom corrected her — not over the top, but enough to communicate — and Punica immediately moved away and laid down. She’s listening. These are important qualities in a young livestock guardian. Independent thought and the ability to observe and learn, as well as an ability to handle corrections, are crucial. All pups can make mistakes. What you do with that information is a lot more important.

The most important things Punica can learn right now are observation and communication. How to watch me and the adult dogs, to learn how to handle things and to know what’s important. And how to pay attention to what the livestock says, so when the animals are in need, you will understand. I teach all of my dogs basic obedience. I like the communication it puts in place, in the making of well mannered dogs. When I am encouraging fellow shepherds to improve the relationships with their working dogs, however, it’s these moments I prioritize when it comes to early learning.

If you aren’t out there, working with the dogs, you’re going to miss all of this. I let my adults help me train, but I don’t leave it all up to them. I’m right there as part of the team. Around here, it’s not the dog and the stock on one side of a fence, while I’m in the house doing human things. We’re all in this together, start to finish. Good livestock guardian dogs should have the instinct that tells them what to do when out with stock, to defend and nurture. I find the dogs do it so much better when they have a “why.” That “why” is their love for me.