

Why Train Your Dog?

By Mary Horne, CPDT-KA, PCOTC Instructor & Competition Obedience Training Director

January has been designated “National Train Your Dog Month” by the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (www.APDT.com). The educational organization chose January because so many dogs and puppies enter new homes during the winter holidays. The APDT wants to help these new canine family members and their people get off to a great start!

Over the last 10 or so years, the US seems to be experiencing a “doggie baby boom.” Many people are inviting dogs into their homes for the first time since childhood. “Designer dogs” are all the rage. The number of multi-dog households is also on the rise (if one is good, two or three must be better, right?). Dogs and dog-related themes are everywhere in our culture – in print ads, on TV commercials, on pillows and flip flops and flannel sheets, all over YouTube. Dogs are clearly “in” right now.

Unfortunately, many of today’s purchases or adoptions seem to be made on looks or style alone. People happen to see a puppy or dog in an ad, on the street, or (sigh) in a pet shop, and think, “Oh, he’s SO cute!” It’s love at first sight, and before they stop to really consider the implications of their move, let alone do proper homework, the dog is in their home, cuddling on the sofa or licking their child’s face. Unfortunately, many people are soon surprised or even angry when their Labrador or Golden Retriever begins to mouth their arms and pick up everything in sight, their Weimaraner or Vizsla never tires, their Border Collie herds their children and nips at their heels, their German Shepherd Dog is hyper vigilant when



guests come in, their Beagle keeps his nose to the ground, their Jack Russell Terrier won't back down from a threat, etc., etc. You get the idea!

Twenty five or 30 years ago, most people who had purebred or specialty dogs got them to serve a specific function in their lives: sheep herding, duck or upland bird hunting, flock guarding, protection, etc. Those people knew what their dogs were bred to do and trained them to enhance their natural proclivities. It was rare that someone who didn't plan to hunt with his dog brought a Vizsla or English Setter or Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever into his or her life.

What can be done to help ensure the modern dog and modern owner enjoy a long and happy life together?

The first step is to recognize --preferably *before* the dog comes home—who that particular dog is and what he was bred (over generations, consciously, by human intervention) to do. Understanding (and anticipating) normal dog behavior is really important!

The second step is to *teach* your dog what kind of housemate and family member you want him to be. Dogs don't come knowing the rules of our human households any more than we would innately know the rules of etiquette when visiting a foreign country. Education is required.

The great news is that modern dog training is *really* fun—fun for the dogs *and* for us! Gone are the military-style dog training days (we hope!) of yelling and intimidation. Today, dogs and humans are on the same team. Training means establishing clear lines of communication in both directions—up and down the leash. It involves brains rather than brawn. It isn't so much about "fixing the dog" as it is about arriving at a mutual understanding about what works and what doesn't for both. And like anything worth doing, it takes thought, time, and effort. But the benefits are myriad and the process is reward in and of itself.

TEN THINGS TO LOVE ABOUT POSITIVE DOG TRAINING

1. Training *strengthens your bond with your dog*. See how much more attentive your dog becomes after just a few brief sessions of fun training.
2. Training *doesn't take a lot of time*. If you recognize that, any time you and your dog are together, one of you is training the other, you will be a lot closer to understanding why your dog behaves the way he does. Use your time together wisely. Set up your dog's life so he can easily behave in ways you enjoy and has minimal opportunities to make mistakes. A couple of 5 minute sessions each spent day actively training your dog by teaching basic manners, tricks, retrieving—anything, really – can yield surprisingly good results! Use the time when you are going to interact with him anyway (before meals, on walks, when you first come home, etc.), and you will see progress. Leave his behavioral learning to chance, and you are likely to be disappointed.
3. Training *builds trust* in you and in the process of life in general. By teaching a dog what we want him to do, a lot of uncertainty is removed. This can benefit the shy dog and the assertive dog alike.
4. Training *allows your dog greater freedom*. A dog who comes when called can enjoy off-leash hikes in safe areas. A dog who doesn't jump on people is more likely to be welcome at gatherings.
5. Training *gives your dog something to think about*. I once heard someone say our biggest crime against dogs, after neglect, is boring them to death. We lead very busy lives; however, we ARE our dogs' lives.
6. Training teaches him *the rules of life with humans*. It's really not fair to punish him for breaking our rules if we haven't told him what those rules are, in a way he can understand. Much like a child, the dog needs to know how he can get things right.
7. Training *opens the doors to participation in a whole host of fun dog sports* -- from agility and competition obedience to canine water sports, tracking, canine musical freestyle, and more.

8. Training *helps keep him in a "forever" home*. Many more dogs suffer untimely deaths from behavior problems caused by lack of proper socialization and training than from disease. A well-trained dog is much less likely to be surrendered to a shelter than an untrained one.
9. Training *creates one more ambassador for the species*. Legislation to ban dogs from apartment buildings, parks and other public places has been on the rise. There are as many people who are uncomfortable around or downright afraid of dogs as there are those of us who adore them. If we do our part to make sure our dogs are gentle, friendly and under control at all times when out in public, perhaps we can turn the current tide and keep the places we can enjoy with our beloved companions.
10. Training can give you a *great sense of satisfaction*, as well as added perspective and compassion. The longer I am involved with dogs, the more convinced I have become that *they* are the real teachers and we have so much to learn from them.

Today we have at our disposal a wealth of wonderful training resources based on solid science and sound principles, not opinion and superstition. So join a positive training class, hire a certified private trainer (visit the "trainer search" area of the APDT website), invest in a good training book, join a training or breed club. Get out there and train your dog and see what a pleasure both the journey and the destination provide you both.

To learn more about National Train Your Dog month and to find helpful training tips, please visit www.trainyourdogmonth.com.

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