

Nothing in Life is Free, Or How to Get Your Dog to Respect (and hence, love) You

Many times we hear a new owner say “But if I don’t give him lots of treats and toys and let him sleep on the couch, he won’t love me.” Then that new owner is surprised and dismayed when the dog begins to think that he, rather than the owner should be in charge.

Often this is accompanied by other undesirable behaviors, such as aggressive behavior toward visitors and maybe even family members, excessive barking at noises or other events outside the house, territorial marking in the house, etc. Believe it or not, these are actually signs that the dog is feeling insecure because he has no real “leader of the pack”.

Other symptoms are defiance of commands that the dog knows and used to follow, such as refusals to get off furniture or to come to you, along with insistent demands for your attention and treats or refusals to let you take toys or treats away from him. These can be seen as attempts on the part of the dog to establish some rules of its own in order to stabilize what it sees as a situation not under control. Some dogs will attempt to control you not by open physical defiance, but by pushy demands such as scratching hard at you for attention, worming their way insistently under your arm or hand, wriggling onto your lap without invitation, etc.

We cannot repeat too many times: a dog is not a human. His reactions and psychology are different in many respects from those of a human, and therein lie precisely the fascination and benefits of living with a dog. They pull us out of ourselves and make us connect with the world outside us, thus giving us a better perspective on our world. A dog is most confident when he knows exactly where he fits within his group, be it other dogs or humans or both, and has a structured safe environment where he knows the rules and is convinced that he will be fine and loved if he follows those rules. Once the dog has learned to respect you, love will follow. You must gain his respect before you can truly claim that the dog loves you.

What we recommend for gaining that respect is a program often called “Nothing in Life Is Free” or “NILIF”. Essentially this program of dealing with the behaviors mentioned above teaches the dog that it depends upon you for everything it receives, thus making the point to the dog that it needs you and has to earn what it receives from you by appropriate behavior toward you and others. This program benefits the relationship between you and your dog no matter what sort of personality your dog has, whether it is dominating or fearful, pushy or timid. The technique has nothing to do with coercion or physical force and everything to do with being the master of the situation.

Your first task will be to teach your dog a few very simple obedience commands which every dog should have in its repertoire anyway, namely, “sit”, “down”, “stay” and “come”. Of those, “sit” and “down” are probably the most important for our purposes. “Shake hands” or “Give paw” is something most dogs, especially puppies, actually love to do and if you put it on command, it will be something else you can have the dog do to earn a reward. We will not go into the details of training those here, but only say that the training should be done with the most motivational and least coercive methods possible. We also recommend that all family members be able to get the dog to obey these commands, even children, at least those over the age of eight or so. If the dog has been taught by rewards, it will learn that even the kids are capable of giving rewards and begin to gain respect for them also.

Once your dog will follow ‘sit’ and ‘down’ commands, even if reluctantly and slowly, you are ready to start him on “NILIF”. The guiding principle is exactly what it says: does your dog want something? Then he should have to do something you tell him to do before he gets it. The reward can be a treat, petting, throwing a ball or a toy, anything the dog wants. No matter what it is the dog wants, he must first obey a command. For example, at feeding time, you do not just put the food down on the floor. You first have the dog sit before you put it down. If the dog is too pushy and eager, make it stay and wait until you say a release word such as “OK”. Or use a “down” command instead. “Down” is a much more submissive position than “sit”, so if the reward is something the dog really, really wants, he should have to do more to earn it. This teaches the dog that you control the food and it may not demand to have it without acknowledging

that you own the food (and the bowl). This is another reason not to “free feed”, i.e., to leave a certain amount in the bowl at all times. If you free feed, it is much less obvious to the dog that the food comes from you and doesn’t just magically appear in the bowl. It also discourages defending the food bowl because the dog thinks it belongs exclusively to him.

If the dog wants to go outside, have it sit by the door before you open it. When you go for a walk, the dog should sit to have its leash put on and remain sitting until you open the door or you give him the signal to get up. If the dog wants you to throw a ball, it should, obviously, have to give the ball up first, but it is a good idea to have the dog sit before you throw it. If the dog is begging for petting, make it sit, down, or shake hands before you offer petting.

Other behaviors can be extinguished by ignoring them and refusing to reward them. For example, if the dog is demanding attention by jumping up on you, try turning your back and completely ignoring the behavior. The moment it stops, turn and tell the dog to sit. If he does, then he immediately should receive attention, praise and petting. This should condition the dog to expect attention from a polite sitting behavior rather than rude launches off your body. Your part of this bargain is that the dog deserves to get attention, at least praise and a pat, when he comes up and sits politely. The same sort of techniques work for demanding rakes with the paw or pushing wriggling into your lap.

Be on the alert for controlling behaviors on the part of your dog and work on making it clear that you are the one in control and not the dog. You should soon see a happier, more confident and more loving dog, one that knows where it fits in the hierarchy and is happy to cooperate in expectation of having its love returned.

-Cheryl Dawson,
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