

It's A Dog's World™

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3890 Walnut Ave. Chino, Ca. 91710 • Local 909-548-3150 • Toll Free 866-324-DOGS • Fax 909-548-3154
www.ItsADogsWorld.biz

“Nothing In Life is Free”

How to (Re)Establish Leadership with Your Dog

Many dog behavior problems can be directly linked to one key factor; lack of appropriate leadership by the owners. Dogs are pack animals that must learn to work together in a social hierarchy that enables them to function productively for the good of all the pack members. To do this, it is necessary for a dominant dog to become the pack leader or “alpha” while the rest of the pack remains subordinate. The leader or “alpha” dog is the one that has first access to all the “critical” resources. These resources include food, resting places, mates, territory and favored possessions.

Problems arise when your dog fails to recognize you as the dominant “alpha” leader. As a result, your dog may try to fill that leadership void by taking charge, often, in inappropriate ways. Some of the ways a dog will display that he has taken over may include constant demands for attention from you, challenging you by growling or barking at you when you give it a correction, leaning on you, barging in front of you when you are going in or out of a doorway, territorial marking (urinating on the corners of household furniture, bedding, etc.) even after the dog has previously relieved itself outdoors, growling or snapping if attempts are made to move the dog from its position on the furniture, and other types aggressive behavior directed toward you or other family members when walking past the dog while it is resting or eating.

Directing and Controlling Behavior

Now's the time to firmly and consistently establish that YOU, and YOU ALONE are the alpha in the pack. From the dog's perspective, only someone they respect has the right to control, direct or inhibit another dog's behavior. As the human and as your dog's owner you have control of all things that are wonderful in his life. This is the backbone of the Nothing In Life Is Free (NILIF) program.

NILIF means your dog must work for everything he gets from this day forward: Food, playing, attention, walks, going in and out of the door, playing with toys, etc. As your dog's leader, it is imperative that you maintain consistency while being firm and fair. Inconsistency will only result in confusing your dog to the point that he will end up ignoring you. It's also important to use lots of praise for any good behavior.

Getting Started

First and foremost, avoid confrontation. If your dog is aggressive, this is paramount for the success of the program and for your safety. If the dog is continually placed in situations in which it feels the need to defend itself, aggression simply becomes a learned behavior. Example: If your dog attempts to guard a rawhide chew and you back away and say, “Oh

well, just finish it," what has the dog learned? It's learned that aggression works. If it wants you to go away, all it has to do is growl. Therefore, if your dog aggresses when guarding a specific treat or toy, then remove those items altogether. If your dog growls when you pet it on the head, it is trying to tell you something. So don't do it. Pet it under the chin or on the chest, instead.

Make a written list of the top 5-10 resources for your dog. This may be food, treats, toys, attention, play, special resting places, walks, car rides, etc. Don't waste your time or the dog's by trying to control resources that don't mean much to the dog.

Make sure your dog knows a few basic obedience commands like "Sit", "Down" and "Stay". This is how your dog is going to earn its resources and privileges. If your dog's hungry, he simply has to sit before his bowl is put down and he must remain sitting until you tell him he can get up to eat. If he wants to go outside or come inside, he must sit and wait for permission from you before he can enter or exit. If he wants you to pet him, then he must either "sit" or "down" before he receives affection. This isn't cruel or unloving to your dog. It is simply teaching your dog in a manner that he understands.

Create a "no-reward" marker. This is a way of telling the dog that it did not respond correctly. A "no-reward" mark can be the removal of a cherished item, such as a toy or treat, removal of your attention (you turn your back and walk away) or removal from a location of privilege like the furniture, your bed, or for smaller dogs, your lap. You may also pair the no-reward mark with a verbal response such as, "Sorry," "Too bad," or "Wrong." This will help reinforce the response you give to the dog's behavior and helps the dog learn the difference between right and wrong.

Stay calm. In the beginning, your dog may be confused by his sudden role reversal, which means he's going to try that much harder to retain his pack position. Be firm and consistent and avoid getting angry or confrontational. For instance, if your dog jumps up in your lap for attention, immediately and calmly remove him and place him back on the floor. If he's used to getting up and claiming his space, he's naturally going to jump right back up again. Repeat the process of removing him and placing him on the floor. You can add a "no-reward" marker but avoid talking to him or justifying your behavior to him. The point is to give him as little attention as possible until he stops attempting to get up on your lap.

Establishing Rules

All animals have rules. Dogs are no different. In this program, all the dog must do is complete a specific obedience command, such as "sit" or "down" and defer to you. This is a simple yet extremely powerful behavior. It will not take away a dog's love of life, personality or spunk.

1) *Have specific feeding times.* If the dog has food in its bowl all the time, why does it need you? The dog should not be free fed (unless there is a medical problem present). You must be the one to offer food (the bowl coming from your hand) when and only when the dog

sits and waits for you to tell it that it is now okay to get up and eat. Because dominant alpha dogs typically eat before the rest of the pack, you should also avoid feeding your dog immediately before you eat. Either feed your dog after you have eaten or allow ample time between your dog's feedings and when your meals.

2) *Ignore controlling behavior.* Example: When your dog comes up to you while you are sitting on the couch and nudges your arm for attention, ignore it. When the dog stops this behavior, call it over to you and ask for a "sit". When the dog does, you can pet it. You have just controlled the situation, not the dog.

3) *Praise & affection need to be earned.* Over-praising a dog makes the praise uneventful. It is not appreciated. If you control and ration all praise and attention, your dog views you as more authoritative. The timing and tone of the praise is also critical. For example, praise the dog when it is doing something you want, such as sitting or laying down quietly, walking on the leash without pulling, etc.. It's also important to put some emotion in your voice when you give praise to your dog, without going overboard. Keep your voice upbeat and happy and your dog will be able to sense your sincerity.

4) *Toys are a privilege that must be earned.* The dog should have access to only one toy at a time and only when you give it to him. Otherwise, the toys should be put away. You control the use of toys and the time spent playing with them. Example: If your dog has a toy and is insisting that you play, (and you don't want to) give your no-reward mark and leave the yard or the room and return in a few minutes. Now call the dog to you and ask for a sit. The dog is only allowed to play with you when you ask for it. Give a command for this such as, "Let's play!" This makes things easier for the dog to understand. When you want to end the game, give another command such as, "That's all!" This will give your dog guidelines to follow. If your dog persists with play after you have requested the game to end, again give the no-reward mark and leave the area and do not interact with the dog for a few minutes. You can also put the cherished toy away so that it is out of sight, especially if your dog is becoming obsessive. Also, eliminate Tug-of-War games. These games encourage snapping, growling and competitive behavior in dogs, and if your dog consistently ends up "winning" the game by yanking the toy out of your hand and running off with it, you have just reinforced your dog's dominant behavior.

5) *No high places.* While there is nothing inherently wrong with allowing your dog on the furniture or bed, the dog should not be allowed to help himself without an invitation from you. High places are a way dominant dogs use to gain control. Dogs feel more authoritative when on a higher level. Initially, don't allow your dog on the furniture or bed at all. You've got to establish that it's your house and everything in it is yours, including him, his food, his treats, his toys, his bed, his crate, everything! Similarly, dog's that have been invited onto the furniture should immediately get off when told to do so.

6) *Do not cater to any demanding behavior.* If your dog is barking in your face for attention, give the no-reward mark and walk away. After a few minutes of silence from the dog, ask it to come over to you and sit. Then you can give attention.

7) *Watch for subtle, pushy, defiant behavior.* It is important for you to “claim your space”. If your dog comes up and deliberately leans against you, push back with the side of your leg or arm. If your dog jumps on you, don’t back away. Simply turn your back on the dog or push it off of you. Make a habit of moving your dog out of your way. For example, if he’s lying on the floor, make it a practice to move him with the side of your foot by pressing against him until he’s forced to move over for you. Same with the furniture – move your dog over – don’t move over for the dog. If you own a small breed dog, don’t allow the dog to just jump up in your lap. If he does so without invitation, immediately pick your dog up and place it on the floor along with the no-reward marker. The same thing should happen if the dog growls when someone attempts to sit next to it and invades his space.

8) *Freedom is to be earned.* If your dog is urinating or marking in the house, then he loses the privilege of roaming the house freely and is either confined to a small, observable puppy-proofed area of the house or is put on a lead that you control. If your dog fails to obey a command to earn its freedom, it should only be taken out under escort on the lead.

9) *Be the first one in and out of every door.* It may sound silly to us, but to a dog, whoever goes in and out of the door first is “alpha”. To reinforce the idea to your dog that you are the leader, you get the privilege of being first in and first out. Make your dog sit. Once he’s sitting calmly, you go out the door first, then give him the okay to follow you. Repeat this process when you go in the door. Do this every time, no exceptions.

Conclusion

Behaving like a leader means that you must demonstrate – to the dog’s satisfaction – that your behavior is that of a higher status animal. Each dog will have different criteria for what constitutes adequate leadership skills on your part, and his expectations may change considerably as he grows and matures, requiring that you also make shifts in your approach. Your dog will grant you precisely the respect you have earned. The more intelligent, confident and ambitious the dog, the more likely he is to quickly notice tiny shifts in your behavior on any given day, and to test you and the rules regularly. As the leader, it is your responsibility to live up to your dog’s expectations.