



“Man’s best friend.” The reason why dogs have been described like this over centuries is because of their unwavering loyalty and their good nature towards humans. However now and again, behavioural problems crop up in pet dogs which cause many people to dispute whether dogs are really man’s best friend. Behavioural problems can range from aggression, to destructive behaviour like chewing and digging, to house soiling. Some of these problems can be blamed on uninformed and uninvolved owners who do not spend the time to properly socialise and do basic training when they first acquire their dogs as puppies. Some behavioural problems are age related and usually associated with young animals. If that is the case, these problems are likely to disappear once the animal gets older – however the old adage of “bend the tree when it is still young” is very relevant. If bad behaviour is not addressed in the correct manner at a young age, such behaviour can actually become imbedded and very difficult to alter as the animal ages. Some behavioural problems are genetic and in these instances it would be very difficult to alter unwanted behaviour. We talk about unwanted behaviour because such behaviour is usually considered to be unacceptable in the context of the circumstances in which the dogs is kept. In many cases this behaviour was actually the basis for selection of certain character traits of a specific breed of dog. An example would be a Jack Russel Terrier which was bred to hunt hares and go down holes in the ground to hunt after them. Therefore, if a Jack Russel has “attention deficit” when it comes to obedience when there are critters around them in the garden and they cannot resist the temptation to dig and the owner is irritated and upset with this “unwanted” behaviour then one has to remember that this was what these dogs were bred to do in the first place. Expecting of a Jack Russel to behave like a lap dog whilst they are in actual fact little hunters is not only unfair but sets the tone for a disastrous relationship of misunderstanding. Alas the behavioural problem may in actual fact be brought about by not researching the breeds properly in advance and knowing what to expect from the relationship. Another example of “unwanted” behavioural traits is aggression towards other dogs. There is a strong breed predilection in this regard with many larger terrier types and the one with the worst reputation is the Pit Bull Terrier. Most Pit Bull owners will tell you that this breed has the gentlest nature towards the owner and humans. However when it comes to other dogs, aggression towards other dogs was one of the characteristics chosen with the development of this breed. Hence aggression to other dogs has been bred into the fiber of their DNA and trying to make a “lover out of a fighter” just goes against the grain of this breed to start out with. It is not impossible to train such a dog differently but its natural inclination would be to be very aggressive towards other dogs.

Aggression towards humans is a very different and serious problem which needs urgent intervention. Should your dog show aggression towards you, act swiftly and decisively by a stern reprimand. Should this not have the desired effect then consult with your vet for assistance.

It should be clear that defining what you want from the relationship with your dog is very important before you acquire a dog. Then once you have decided what it is you want, do thorough research to make sure that the breed you have in mind has a natural inclination towards the character traits you are looking for.

Even though dogs and humans have lived together for thousands of years misunderstandings can still occur between them from time to time, which leads to unhappiness for all concerned. Understanding the nature and social make up of dogs is a good starting point to create meaningful and joyful relationships. Dogs are pack animals who function well when the natural structure of a pack is maintained. Dogs thrive when they function in the constraints of a properly structured pack.

Dogs are social and like to interact with people and other dogs. Your dog will do what you want it to do if it earns him praise or petting and he considers you to be the leader of his pack. All dog packs have a leader dog that makes decisions for the rest of the group. Other dogs are subordinate to the leader. Your dog should never think he is the leader in your house. You are the one who should decide when to eat, when to go out, when to play and when to be quiet. Most human psychologists tell us that children function well when they are given boundaries. Dogs are no different. When they know where the boundaries are they experience security. When there are no boundaries, dogs are likely to wreak havoc. Setting boundaries does not mean your dog will never push them. Therefore being strict with a dog that steps over the boundaries is likely to produce a well behaved companion and pet. Many behavioural problems are a direct result of a lack of leadership on the part of the owner.

Dogs behave better when they have a leader who takes charge. Taking charge in a firm but loving way has the ultimate benefit of a much happier pooch. Your dog will feel loved when the social hierarchy is clear and where he knows where he stands within it. He is likely to feel safe when he knows his place in the pack and when he knows you are the leader. Sometimes it may be hard to take charge as the route of least resistance is often not to step up to the plate and take charge. Just letting things go may seem like a good idea to create a relaxed atmosphere in your home, however it may have dire consequences. To truly make your dog your best friend, you sometimes have to be willing to be cruel to be kind. An easy way of establishing your dominance in the pack hierarchy is to make sure you position yourself physically higher than the dog. Dogs interpret an increase in height as an increase in status. Dogs that sleep up on the bed are especially impressed with themselves. Keep dominant dogs on the floor, not up on the chairs, couches, or bed. If you want to cuddle, get down on the floor, ask for obedience, and then pet when your dog complies.

Another way of establishing your leadership is by “taking the lead”. The pack leader has priority, meaning they get to push out the door first to get something they want. This is why a lot of dogfights

occur at doorways over who gets to go out first. Control the space in front of the dog and you control the dog. Use body blocks or head toward a door or doorway and then suddenly turn and go the other way if your dog tries to get ahead of you. This puts you back in the lead. Praise and pet your dog when it starts to turn around after you and keep moving until it reaches you. Practice this as you move around the house until your dog is content to stay behind you and follow your lead.

When you take your dog outside your home teach your dog the classic position of heel. Teach your dog to stay at your side while you initiate pace and direction. In order to teach a dog this position it is often wise to take your dog to puppy classes from 8 weeks of age. Puppy socialisation classes are like the “kindergarten” of dog training schools. Here your puppy can play and romp around with other puppies and socialise in a non-threatening and controlled environment. This sets the stage for very basic training like “sit”, “stay”, “down” and “heel” which once again sets the scene for more advanced obedience training should this be something you would like to pursue. Basic puppy training is a must for anyone wanting a meaningful and pleasant relationship with their dog. Advanced obedience training is for people who want to take dog training to the next level and is not a pre-requisite for having a relaxed harmonious relationship with their dog. Many adverse behavioural problems can also be prevented and curbed at a very young age, before they blow up into major problems by starting off with puppy socialisation and basic puppy training classes.

Dogs are very sensitive to body language and visual cues. Actions that you don’t think much about, may communicate a message to your dog which you never intended to do! For instance, two people talking face to face are confrontational in a dog’s body language. Standing side by side is not. You can learn to take advantage of nonverbal clues to your dog.

It’s not good to cater to your dog. Your dog’s behaviour should drive your decisions on how to treat him. If your dog has always been a perfect gentleman, you may not need to change a thing you are doing. Using food as a reward for learning new commands is a good idea, but don’t give a food reward every time. Giving food intermittently means your dog will perform commands for you even when you don’t have food, and also prevents weight gain. Keep all training positive and consistent.

Playful biting is a natural behaviour for dogs when interacting in a friendly and social environment. However if your dog bites you in any other way than a very gentle and playful way you should discourage this behaviour by totally ignoring him for two days to notify him there’s been a change in the household and the “rules of the game”. Don’t speak to him or look at him, even when feeding or letting him out. Applying “social distance” when your pet is misbehaving and rewarding him with praise and attention only when he is good, is the key to good behaviour. Reward the behaviour you want to see continued!

When your dog does what he is supposed to do, reward him by praising him and by petting him. Keep it brief and pet only for obedience. When your dog behaves well and responds to your commands, reward this good behaviour by focused attention. Attention should be on your terms. If your dog

demands petting which is not on your terms, ignore this behaviour by looking away and avoiding any physical contact. Should you want to interact with your dog you can give a command and only respond with further attention as soon as he has complied. Once he has, you can immediately pet or stroke him and praise him with a friendly voice like “good boy” or “good dog”.

Should you want to pet your dog, always initiate the interaction from your side. Your dog has a natural inclination to come to you and “ask” for affection. Responding to the dog every time it comes to you is like being trained by your dog and not vice versa. Be careful not to be tempted to respond with attention and affection every time your dog approaches you. If you did not initiate the interaction then ignore the dog when he comes to you. Only pet your dog when you call it to you. Do not go to the dog when you want to pet it as this sets the behavioural pattern in the dog’s mind of “training the owner to come and pet me whenever I feel like interaction”. Don’t let your dog demand play, food, or petting. If your dog gets pushy, simply cross your arms, turn your head upward and to the side away from the dog. If your dog counters by moving to your other side, turn your head the other way. This is good practice to do any time your dog approaches you if he is very dominant and pushy. It is especially important if your dog has shown any aggression towards you.

A good solid “down” and “stay” is one of the best learning tools. It teaches your dog to be patient and to wait for your command. Start with one-second stays for the first few days, and work up to longer and longer ones. After three weeks, most dogs can handle a half-hour down stay during a quiet time of the day. Correct breaks with a body block or a downward leash correction — not by simply repeating “down” & “stay” over and over again. If your dog gets up 15 times, then correct it 15 times with the same actions and tone of voice. Do not include anger in your correction but be firm.

Following basic obedience training should make treating any other behavioural problems easier. A dog that looks to you for direction can be taught almost anything. It will be happy to work for what it wants and it helps keep its mind occupied constructively. Integrate this training into your day by asking your pet to perform some action whenever it wants to go outside, be fed, play ball, etc. Letting you be in charge will soon become second nature to the dog.

Most problem dog behaviours are **NORMAL** dog behaviours that are simply unacceptable to the humans they live with. Redirecting and retraining can make our canine companions better and happier pets.

Before you acquire a dog, do proper research by searching the internet or getting hold of some of the many good books on dog breeds and training. Make sure you select the correct breed that would match your personality, environment and relational requirements. Be cautious when approaching training as there are many philosophies of how to train a dog. Outdated or cruel methods are still widely available in print. Much progress has been made in the past few years in understanding how dogs think and learn. We are able to deal with problem behaviours much more effectively once we understand how a dog’s mind works. Read more than one book and pick the methods that make the most sense to you. Consult with your vet if you are having problems. In severe cases, you may be referred to a pet behavioural specialist.