

Harmonious Living

This article is designed to give you an insight into how to develop a good relationship with your dog built on trust, by understanding what your dog needs and how to provide it in today's busy world.

➤ **Dogs need to be socialised**

They need to be exposed to things they will have to be comfortable with later. This sounds self-explanatory but you'd be surprised just how many people keep their new pup indoors until it's 16 weeks old and then are shocked when it's scared of new things. This socialisation and exposure to new places and things should be continued throughout the dog's life for maximum 'bomb proofing'. Briefly, the more things your dog/pup experiences in a pleasant way, the better. Even an older shy dog can be improved with gentle slow exposure and lots of positive experiences.

➤ **Always be consistent.**

Decide with all the family members what the 'dog' rules will be then make sure everyone sticks to them. It is unkind and confusing to allow one activity or behaviour one day and then not allow it the next. You cannot reason with a dog – a rule or boundary must stay the same or the dog will just disregard it totally (and everything else you say!) or get distressed and unhappy because of her unpredictable environment. This can lead to high frustration for the dog and a whole host of problems for the family.

➤ **Dogs do what works for them.**

If something has a pleasant outcome they **WILL** repeat it! This can work for you or against you. Make it work for you by asking your dog to be patient and polite to get whatever it is she desires: polite behaviour will increase. (Plan to be in control of access to the goodies. Use a lead if necessary to get the polite behaviour needed before allowing your dog access.) Use access to ANYTHING your dog likes as a way of rewarding nice behaviour: don't squander those hidden opportunities by giving goodies for free – and yes, being allowed to sniff that tree is a reward! Ensure that this doggy quirk doesn't work against you. If your dog does something that she enjoys but you hate (digging up your new plants, chewing the couch etc.) don't allow her to repeat the behaviour – practice makes perfect. Management is one strategy: (see below) or teach her to do something else; retrieve your slippers rather than chew them. Provide a legitimate outlet and think laterally to problem solve rather than punishing a natural canine behaviour.

➤ **Management is your best defence.**

If you can prevent your new pup from ever discovering that table legs are good to chew, work tops sometimes have food to steal, carpets make great loos and cats are fantastic to chase, you have almost won the training game! Prevention is much better than cure because most of these doggy acts cannot be 'cured'. E.g. providing *lots* of appropriate chewies and not allowing unsupervised access to table legs teaches chew toy chomping not table gnawing. Have your pup on lead in the house if she runs riot, or crate train her. Don't leave food in reach for her to steal. Housetrain her. Teach her a control behaviour (i.e. sit/look) for dealing with exciting distractions that are unavoidable.

➤ **Dogs need to work.**

If they don't have a job to do, they will find one. It may be landscaping the garden, demolishing the laundry or guarding the yard. Keep your dog busy by providing all her food in interactive puzzle toys or even by simply scattering her kibble over the yard and lawn area. The more interesting ways your dog can earn her daily diet, the less mental energy she'll have to get creative in her own job seeking. Don't forget training is a job. Learning takes mental energy so a good training session will go a long way to satisfy your dog's mental stimulation needs. If you have a working breed, or high energy dog, consider taking up a dog sport such as obedience or agility: great fun for dog and handler.

➤ **Dogs need physical exercise.**

Once round the block just will not cut it for most canines. Ideally, one hour's off lead running should be provided daily. If that is impractical, two 45 min walks on either a long lead or a flexi will at least make a dent in your dog's energy budget. If you can teach your dog to fetch you have a superb way of exercising her in a small area, or play hide and seek up and down stairs in the house if it's raining. Get creative about how you provide your dog's exercise, perhaps take her swimming if she likes water, or take up jogging and keep both of you fit.

➤ **Dogs need company.**

They are social aliens – that's why we love them. Social isolation is an unnatural and distressing situation for a dog to endure. If you got your dog for companionship (and most people do) spend lots of quality time with her. Teach her to be well mannered in the house so she can spend time relaxing with you. Employ a dog walker or sitter to break up her day if you work long hours, or take her to doggy day care a couple of days a week. Remember to also teach your dog to be **comfortable** (rather than endure) being alone for reasonable time periods. If she relaxes while you're out she probably won't bark or destroy things.

➤ **Work at your relationship**

Train, don't complain. It's unfair to expect your dog to just 'know' how you want her to behave. Remember she doesn't speak English (or French or German etc.) so you must teach her what your weird noises mean and what you expect her to do when you wave your hand in that funny way. Using positive reinforcement training creates a win-win situation and builds a strong trusting relationship between you and your dog. You cannot expect your dog to pay attention and comply with your wishes unless you've taught her that it's in her best interests to do so because great things happen for her when she does.