

The A-B-C's of Your New D-O-G

Congratulations on adopting your new dog! Below is a guide to help acquaint you with certain features of a dog's behavior so that you know what to expect when you bring your new best friend home. Once you understand how your dog thinks, you'll understand why he does what he does, what types of problems to expect, and how to handle them.

Please know that the *key to preventing behavior problems is proper training*. Buy a dog training book, go to the library, or look online to do some homework. Or you may want to consider a more personalized approach by seeking a professional trainer for your dog or enrolling him in a dog obedience school (an individual or group setting will depend on your dog).

YOUR DOG'S "OPERATING CHARACTERISTICS"

- In the natural environment, dogs live in groups – they are pack animals. Pack animals operate according to a rank structure system; they do not understand equality, they understand rank within the pack.
- Dogs that are allowed to become “leaders” within their human packs are dogs that present behavior problems to their owners. They may nip, bite or growl at anyone who attempts to control them, or they may engage in attention-getting behaviors such as barking, jumping or “nagging” in order to get attention.

YOUR DOG'S COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

- Evolution has provided dogs with elaborate communication systems: they use sounds, smell, and body language to convey messages.
- In order to communicate rank status within a pack, your dog uses body signals, and these are the same signals he uses to communicate within his “family pack.” *As a dog owner, it is critically important to communicate with the animal at this level, rather than at your level.*
- Dominance signals are used to inform family members that the dog believes it is the leader within the group. Behaviors such as nipping and mouthing, snarling and snapping are but a few. If the animal stares at you and/or guards its food and possessions, it is signaling its superior rank. Soiling in the home, even though the dog is house-trained, is another example.

SOCIAL STIMULATION

- Because your dog is a pack animal, it enjoys the company of other pack members. The prolonged absence of such social contact will have a devastating effect on your dog's emotional wellbeing.
- *Dogs that are left unattended in the back yard for prolonged periods of time will not become good pets.* They will develop tension-relieving behaviors such as barking, digging, or chewing; furthermore, they will never be adequately house-trained.

CONTROL WHEN YOU'RE NOT HOME

- If you allow your new dog to roam the house while you're away, look out! Chewing, house-soiling, and excessive barking may result. An excellent method to combat these tendencies is to utilize a crate.
- Is it cruel to confine a dog in this way? Not if he is properly introduced and trained to his crate. Dogs are naturally denning animals; they do not mind spending time in their “den” so long as they are conditioned to enjoy it.
- Remember, to understand your dog you must think like you dog. A crate is only a prison to a human or to an improperly conditioned animal.

HOUSETRAINING

- The crate has another important property. It teaches your new dog how to “hold it.”
- Dogs do not like to soil their dens. Therefore, when in his crate, your dog will tend to withhold his eliminations.
- Crate training, in conjunction with regularly scheduled feeding will go a long way towards accomplishing this task. Obviously, no dog should be kept in the crate for prolonged periods of time, especially young puppies.
- When the owner arrives home, he should immediately take the animal outside to a designated elimination area, wait until elimination has occurred, and immediately reward this activity.
- Indoor “potty pads” are not recommended – they teach the dog to eliminate inside the house.
- Consistency, patience, and kindness are the keys to successful house-training. And in the case of accidents, do not use physical punishment and do not rub his nose in it!

CHEWING

- Chewing is a natural activity; it occurs often in puppies while they are teething and in older dogs when stressed. It also is quite normal when new and interesting objects are encountered.
- Your success in curbing chewing depends upon how effectively you can channel your dog’s tendencies toward acceptable objects such as rawhide bones, chew hooves, nylon bones and rubber toys.
- Do not provide objects that resemble your valued objects (e.g. shoes, socks, etc.). When your dog begins to chew an unacceptable item, replace it with one of his chewies. Keep his chewies and your valued objects as different as possible.

BARKING

- Barking is one form of communication. It is also one way your dog can learn to demand attention.
- It is difficult to teach a dog never to bark, but we can take steps to control it.
- Never teach the dog to bark (speak) for treats. Do not encourage him to bark at strangers. Do not leave the dog unattended outside.
- Obedience training will help curb and prevent indoor barking by teaching him the “quiet” command.

JUMPING

- Jumping is a greeting response. It is a natural tendency, but it is encouraged and reinforced by owners; it is seldom appreciated however.
- The way to teach a dog not to jump is to teach the dog to sit, and, when he obeys, greet and reward him. In this way everybody wins! Do not put a knee to the chest, step on his toes, or kick him in the stomach.
- If firmer action is required, extend your arm to him, palm up, so that if he jumps he will bump his nose firmly on the heel of your hand.

These are but a few of the common problems that new owners face. One can react to these problems and treat them as the situation demands; however, the better solution is to prevent their occurrence altogether with proper obedience training. Remember: A trained dog is a happy and calm dog because he understands what is expected of him.

Information courtesy of Don McCoy, Ph.D.

The Lexington Humane Society thanks Dr. McCoy for his years of donated dog training services.