

Your Smart Dog

What A Dog Trainer Wants In Her Own Dogs

Think skills, not behaviors.

I was sitting in a session at ClickerExpo a couple weeks ago when a revelation hit me. After training dogs for more than 18 years (and having dogs all my 42 years), I finally knew what I wanted my *next dog* to know and be able to do.

Funny how things -- grand things like this -- hit me after so many years in the field. I scribbled the list in my conference notebook, adding to it whenever a new thought came across my mind.

As I looked at the list at the end of the day, I realized something (another revelation, go figure). Most of the things on my list were *skills*, not *behaviors*. Well, duh. *Of course* they're skills -- behaviors are well, just behaviors! Behaviors by themselves won't get you - or your dog - very far. But skills! Now you're cooking with gas!

Skills are all-encompassing. Behaviors are stand-alone. Skills apply to any situation. Behaviors are usually situation-specific. Wanna know the list of skills my next dog -- the plan is a Great Dane -- will have under his belt long before we start working on behaviors? You're in luck, that's the topic of this month's newsletter!

Relax in his crate. I want to do a lot of traveling with my dogs. I want them to be comfortable wherever we go. I also want them to be safe. Therefore, a crate is a necessity. *Relaxed in the crate* is even more important than the simple behavior of going into the crate.



Top 8 Skills

Teaching these skills is a priority for my next dog. These skills will enable my dog to have the most freedom possible.

- Relaxed in crate.
- Rock-solid recall.
- Name recognition.
- Comfortable with handling and restraint.
- Settle on mat.
- Calm greetings when meeting dogs.
- Calm door behavior at home.
- At ease in new situations and environments.
- Ability to move in tight spaces (Great Dane).

WHAT SKILLS DOES YOUR DOG NEED?

Think about the things you want to do with your dog.

- Do you want to travel with your dog?
- Do you entertain often?
- Do you have kids?
- Is your house busy, chaotic even?
- Will your dog require frequent grooming?



There are other questions that may be relevant to your situation. Think about how you want your dog to fit into your lifestyle. Then make a list of those skills that would help your dog fit is most easily. Then find a positive reinforcement trainer and get to work teaching your dog. It's that easy!

SKILLS N' DRILLS

Relaxing in the crate is fundamental for a dog. He'll be happier when we're traveling (not to mention safer) and I'll be happy knowing that while I'm out to dinner or between working sessions at a dog-training seminar, my dog is relaxing comfortably in his cozy, little home-away-from-home.

Rock Solid Recall. At ClickerExpo, Ken Ramirez of Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, IL, showed video of sea lions with amazing "come when called" skills. I thought to myself, if sea lions can have stellar recalls, there's no reason my dog can't! Ken's sea lions will leave a trainer *with food* when they hear their recall signal. That's powerful! My next dog will be able to leave his food bowl and come running when I call!

Name Recognition. Ramirez gets the credit for this one, too. He works with the cutest river otters. Cute, yes. But very dangerous. By teaching the otters to look at their trainer the instant they hear their name, the trainers are able to keep the peace in the pool while training (and feeding) several river otters at one time. This simple skill of looking at whomever called the otter's name can help skirt a lot of problems before they even start. (Think: dog sees a squirrel and wants to take off. You call the name, dog looks at you. Disaster averted!)

Comfortable with Handling and Restraint. Routine veterinary exams don't need to be cause for anxiety for your dog. I've witnessed a 10,000 pound elephant *volunteer* his foot for nail trims. It's easy to acclimate your dog to nail trims, ear cleanings, and routine restraint. My

next dog will not just tolerate handling, he'll enjoy it!

Settle on Mat. By teaching a dog to relax on his mat/bed, you can then take that mat anywhere you go with your dog and you've got an instant "relax here" sign. Going to visit relatives? Take your mat and your dog will feel comfortable on his mat even though everything around his is new to him.

Calm Greetings When Meeting Dogs. This skill is super important if you plan to take your dog outside. You *will* run into dogs. Maybe even off-leash dogs. Ill-mannered dogs. Grumpy dogs. Your dog will have much better interactions with all dogs that cross his path if he knows how to greet calmly and appropriately. Most dogs aren't born with this skill, but can learn it easily with early training, guidance, and practice.

Calm Door Behavior. If your dog jumps, barks, or dashes out the door when company arrives, you don't need to be told how important this skill is. Teaching your dog to go to a specific place (his mat, for instance) and do something specific (lay down and relax, for instance) can be the simple solution to the inappropriate - and maddening - barking and jumping.

At Ease in New Situations. This is an essential skill for all dogs, unless you plan on never leaving your house with your dog. Ever. This is a no-brainer for those of us who raise service dogs, but many pet owners don't even think about this skill for their dogs. It's not just a "working dog" skill - all pet dogs should be able to take in new situations and remain calm and easy-going. It takes practice, time, and training, of course. But man,

does it ever pay off! Take your dog to outdoor festivals, parks, birthday parties -- anyplace and everywhere dogs are welcome. Lots of downtown areas in cities have dog-friendly businesses and parks where dogs are welcome. Take the time to introduce your dog to these areas as soon as your vet gets him on a regular series of puppy shots.

Ability to Move In Tight Spaces. This one is only for the giant breeds, really. I was at a horse sale recently, and was astounded at the tight circle that horses could make. They could almost turn on a dime -- literally! After seeing 1,000 pound of animal move in such a small space, I added this skill to my list, seeing as how my next dog will be a giant breed.

I hope my list has generated some ideas for you and your dog. It's never too late to get started, and it's even easier when you're starting with a puppy. Find a qualified positive reinforcement trainer and get started today!

Happy training!

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