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Your Smart Dog

A Dog Is as Smart As His Teacher

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I hear a lot of this: “My dog is just dumb.” “My dog doesn’t know how to do anything!” Your dog knows what you teach him. He learns good habits *and bad habits* from you. You can’t just take credit for the good stuff and not the bad stuff. This month, we’ll focus on how much you can -- and do -- teach him.

Theodore Roosevelt, the newest service pup in training, just turned 16 weeks old. For the last eight weeks, his life has been pretty darn good - *everyone* he’s met has greeted him with enthusiasm and have smothered him with affection. Today, life turned Teddy on his head: his first day in public. We visited five different locations and at each of these locations he not only wasn’t greeted enthusiastically, but he wasn’t allowed to greet enthusiastically either. Service dogs should fade into the background, not jump and prance and beg to be petted. The confusion on Teddy’s face was evident. He definitely didn’t understand this new era.

So when he was pulling on the leash and trying to get to every person in the store and on the sidewalk, it was my job to teach Teddy a new skill -- self control in public. He won’t learn it on his own. Left to figure it out for himself, he’d revert right back to running and jumping -- that would certainly get him attention. Unfortunately, it would

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also probably get us kicked out of the store. So instead of getting mad at Teddy and yanking him around on his leash, I taught him how to sit calmly.

When your dog does something you don’t like, say jumping on people at the door, ask yourself: Have I taught the dog what to do? Answer this question: what should the dog

do when someone comes to the door. Actually write the answer. Should your dog sit? Run to his bed? Grab a toy? Go to his crate? If you didn’t teach your dog to do these specific

skills, you haven’t taught your dog what he needs to do. So when the dog jumps, it’s not the dog’s fault. It’s the teacher’s fault. And we, the humans, are the teachers.

Notice I said write down what you want the dog to do. Your answer shouldn’t be: I don’t want the dog to jump. That doesn’t tell the dog what *to do*. Instead of jumping, the dog could tug on your guest’s pant leg, that’s not jumping. Or he could run out the front door, that’s not jumping. Or he could bark hysterically, that’s not jumping. There’s only one thing your dog really needs to do, and that’s sit.

You’ll need to teach your dog to sit, then to sit when there are distractions going on. After all, when someone rings the bell, there’s a lot going on: you’re getting up and



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moving quickly to the door, the door is opening (the dog can see, smell and hear the outdoors, how exciting for him!), a new person is outside...*and moving inside* (yippee, says your dog!), and then the new person is probably saying hello to the dog. Wow. That's a lot of exciting things happening all at once!

Did you teach your dog how to sit with each of those things individually? You can't teach your dog to sit in a quiet house and then expect that behavior to translate to a distracting situation. It's like putting a 15-year old, brand new driver on the crowded freeway in rush hour and expecting him to navigate without any problems. It's just not fair.

A good teacher teaches the student the skill first, then systematically introduces the conditions under which that skill might be used. You don't see football coaches teaching their players a new play during a game, they've spent many hours at practice perfecting the play before it ever gets used in a game. Why do we understand that people need practice, but can't get that our dogs do, too?

After you've taught the dog the skill or behavior he needs to know, be consistent in not only asking for the behavior, but in reinforcing the behavior. I need to ask Teddy to sit before he greets people. If I don't ask him, he'll go right back to jumping. He's not proficient at this skill yet, so I'm a good teacher and I help him achieve success by asking him.

When Teddy does get it right, when he sits to be petted, he gets a little treat, but he also gets what he *really wants*: attention! If I ask Teddy to sit, then don't reward him for

it, why on earth would he keep doing it? Consistency is the key to not only getting behavior, but in keeping it.

Think about one or two things you'd like to teach your dog. Write down what those behaviors are, then start teaching your dog what *to do*. Reinforce those tiny successful steps and before you know it, you'll have a dog who's cooperative! It takes a good teacher to make a great dog!

Happy training!

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