



Your Smart Dog

Teaching (or Re-Teaching) Good Habits

September 2006

As some of you know, we brought home our fifth (can it be that many?!) service dog pup last month. Honeydew reminded me just how much pups need to learn! The good news is that they are like sponges, soaking up anything you can teach them. But what if you adopted an older dog? What if your dog knew manners once, but has been slipping recently? No worries, it's never too late to teach your dog!

Whether you adopted an older dog who was never trained, or you've let your dog's (once well trained) behavior slip a little over the years, the good news is that your dog can learn at any stage in his life.

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If you've got a puppy or a young dog, you're in luck! They are like sponges, ready to soak up anything you teach. Beware, though, they learn bad habits as quickly and easily as they learn good ones! Stay on your toes and look for opportunities to teach your pup what you'd like him **to do**, instead of just correcting all the things you'd rather he not do. For example,

instead of scolding him for jumping on you, teach him *to sit*, and then ask him to sit before he begins to jump. Before you know it, you'll be saying "Good dog!" a lot more often than "Bad dog!" (more fun for both you and the dog, right?!).

"Fine," I hear you saying, "that's great for puppies, but I adopted an older dog who **came with bad habits!** How do I fix his troubles?!" Or maybe a long time ago, you invested the time and effort to train your dog, but life got in the way and some bad habits crept in while you weren't paying attention? Never fear! With just a little bit of time and attention, older dogs – even those who have never had any training – can learn (or re-learn) to be good dogs. I have a few hints to help you and your dog get on the right track...

First, figure out what exactly you want your dog to do. Instead of saying "I wish he wouldn't jump on the guests," think of what you'd like your dog **to do** when guests come over. Would you like him to sit? Go to his bed? Grab a toy? What do you want your dog to do? Be specific!

Second, think of ways to manage the behavior until you can teach your dog what he needs to know. So following the example of the jumping dog, you might want to put your dog on a leash when you know guests will be arriving. Leash the dog before the guests arrive so you're not chasing a barking dog after the door bell rings. You may also find that having very yummy treats in your hand will



distract your dog so he isn't leaping on your visitors as they enter. Managing the situation allows you to (1) get through the situation with less stress (getting guests in and settled without screaming at the dog and apologizing profusely to the guests) and (2) prevents the dog from practicing (and *getting better at*) the inappropriate behavior.

Third, teach your dog what he needs to know to be successful. Back to our exuberant guest-greeting dog, you'll need to teach him how to sit first – since that's what you'd rather he do than jump on the guests. So take 10 or 15 minutes a day and teach your dog to sit – in easy situations at first (a quiet house). Slowly build in distractions (kids walking by, work in a noisy room, etc), and finally practice the real-life situations with friends and family who will cooperate.

Fourth, get the whole family involved. If you're diligently practicing with the dog, but your spouse or kids let the dog engage in the inappropriate behavior, you'll go nowhere fast. The dog will be confused and you'll be angry. Get everyone involved from the first step, have family practice sessions, or award prizes to those family members that put in the most effort.

Fifth, be consistent. If you want the behavior to change, it's going to take practice and patience. And some more practice. The clearer the rules are to the dog, the less confused he'll be and the faster he'll learn. So if you're working on getting your dog to sit to greet guests, don't let him jump sometimes when you're tired or not paying attention. Don't let family or guests unknowingly sabotage your efforts by saying "Oh, it doesn't matter if he jumps on me, I *like* it." For your sanity and the dog's peace of mind, the rules are the same for every person – sit to greet...period.

Finally, have some fun! Working together as a family with the dog can be a lot of fun – for everyone, including the dog! He'll love the attention and you'll love your well behaved friend! Reward your progress – even the tiniest steps! Give yourself a pat on the back and your dog a Milk Bone™ !

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