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Mistakes

An opportunity in disguise
By DIANNA YOUNG
Special to the NEWS



Every household has its own standards concerning pet behavior, so there are no clear rules that apply to every family and all of its pets. But whatever the rules are in your house, you should establish them, not your dog.

Okay, your dog goes berserk when somebody rings the doorbell. It happens in a lot of households. And a lot of people don't know what to do about it, so they do nothing.

The problem with doing nothing, however, is that it silently endorses the dog's behavior. We have to disagree actively with that behavior if we want to change it, and we do so by employing a physical interruption of the behavior, a verbal interruption, or both.

A physical interruption consists of firmly taking hold of the dog's leash or collar and admonishing it when it attempts the bad behavior. A verbal interruption is a voice command or the warning, "No!"

In many households, the behavior bar for canine members is set far too low, and what people get out of their dog usually is not a lot. They often are satisfied if their dog meets just three low standards: it doesn't defecate in the house (at least not very often), it doesn't bite people (at least not very seriously) and it doesn't wreck stuff (at least not most of the time).

Some people believe that's as good as it gets.

They're wrong, of course. Our dogs have so much more to offer. But we have to expect good behavior from them, and require it. We have to set the bar high. Every household has its own standards concerning pet behavior, so there are no clear rules that apply to every family and all of its pets. But whatever the rules are in your house, you should establish them, not your dog.

Many dog owners routinely deal with bad canine behavior by avoiding situations that provoke it. (My dog doesn't like strangers, so I'm not going to introduce him to strangers. My dog goes crazy when he sees other dogs, so I have to keep him away from other dogs.) However, behavioral mistakes by your pet actually provide a wonderful opportunity for teaching.

Obviously, you can't sit your dog down and lecture him about the dangers of chasing cars or the moral turpitude involved in aggressing other animals. Our dogs first have to make a mistake in order to be corrected for it and to learn from the experience. So, view mistakes as positive things, and don't waste the opportunity they provide.

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For example, your dog goes ballistic when the doorbell rings. If you have friends coming for dinner at 6 p.m., put your dog on a leash at 5:45. When the doorbell rings, allow him to make his mistake so you can interrupt the bad behavior physically with the leash.

If your dog chases cars, put him on leash and take him to a place where he'll be tempted to chase. When he attempts it, interrupt the behavior. The lesson is the same for aggressing other animals.

A leash is not an absolute requirement for transmitting a message to your dog, by the way, but it is the most efficient means. It's similar to using reins to direct a horse, and is not likely to be shortcircuited. If your dog is not wearing his leash and you attempt to correct or interrupt his behavior, his first impulse will be to avoid contact. If we give a dog an opportunity to elude us, he will do so. The leash takes away his opportunity to elude.

Something that goes hand in hand with correcting negative behavior as it occurs is taking away a dog's ability to make decisions that should be yours to make. If you give the dog an opportunity to take over decision-making, he will do so. This includes making decisions about household security (Should he aggress visitors at the door?), about whether to dig holes in the yard, about whether to bark incessantly.

Other decisions also should remain in your own domain as leader of the pack. It is a mistake to fall into the error of allowing your dog to require things of you. The things you provide your pet should be gifts to him from you, not something that you produce at his demand. For example, if I decide when dinner will be served, and I present it to him, it's a gift from me. If he decides when he will eat, and demands it from me, he doesn't view that meal as a gift.

If your dog demands that you take him for a walk, you need to make a judgment call about the urgency of his need. I try to give my dog the opportunity to relieve himself prior to him insisting that he needs to do it. We teach our dog to be demanding when he demands food from us and we comply, when he demands that we play with him and we comply, when he demands that we take him for a walk and we comply. We want to do all these things with our dog, but we want to do them on our terms. We want our dog to view them as a gift from us to him.

That doesn't mean that you have to be rigid in your relationship. It is not wrong for your dog to initiate play, but you must be the one to decide whether it will occur and how it will occur. If you throw a stick for your dog, for example, he may demand that you chase him to get it back. In the canine world, a leader never will chase. You must insist that, if he wants to play, he bring the stick and drop it for you.

Every dog, old or young, is in training all of his life. No matter how well he has been schooled, he occasionally is going to experience what I call a behavioral "hiccup." This is a golden opportunity for you to spring into your leadership and teaching role.

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