

## **Dog Tips for Happy Homes and Neighbors**

*by Shannon Ayers and Skye Poitras*

It's estimated that 60% of dogs in animal shelters across the country are there for no other reason than they've been naughty. Since over 5 million adoptable dogs and cats are put to death in animal shelters every year in the United States, it stands to reason that many of these healthy, loving, and lovable, sometimes just plain goofy dogs will die. This is a tragedy--and totally unnecessary. All dogs--and not just the big guys--must be shown how to behave in the community of people. This doesn't come naturally to dogs; it has to be taught by humans who have chosen to have dogs live among us.

While United Paws of Tillamook neither operates an animal shelter nor is a rescue organization, the local spay/neuter advocacy group has received an increasing number of calls about abandoned or unwanted dogs. So United Paws' volunteers have drawn up a few tips on what to do to ensure your dog doesn't become another Death Row statistic:

### **1) Choosing the right dog.**

Take a close look at your household and family's lifestyle. Start by researching dog size, grooming needs, temperament, and activity level. When you've narrowed your search, look carefully at every dog you consider. Even within breed types, each animal is a unique individual with her or his own personality.

### **2) Dogs should NOT be given as gifts.**

Dogs are dependent, social animals who can live 12-16 years or longer. Adopting a dog is a long-term commitment that the entire family should be in complete agreement on. Consistency is the key. If Mom acts as disciplinarian, while Dad lets the dog get away with pushing some boundaries, and kids let her do whatever she pleases, this can send mixed messages and confuse the animal. Result: bad behavior.

### **3) Potty Training**

Every effort should be made to house-train your dog as soon as possible. It's easier to teach him where to go instead of where not to go. He should receive yummy treats and lots of praise upon completion of elimination in your designated spot. Constant supervision and use of confined areas in the house when he can't be watched will help him not make mistakes. The use of crates can be especially helpful, for example. Not accomplishing potty training can prevent the deep bond that can exist between you and your dog.

### **4) Exercise, Exercise, Exercise!**

Most people underestimate the amount of exercise dogs need. When they get enough exercise, training can be one hundred times easier and lessen unwanted behaviors due to pent-up energy. Exercise does not mean opening the back door and letting your dog wander out to the nearest bush. It means taking him somewhere every day where he can run, chase a ball, jog alongside you, or just go

for a long walk. We are fortunate in Tillamook County to have so many gorgeous places to hike with dogs. Take advantage of them.

**5) Socialize and Desensitize**

Socializing technically refers to the first 16 weeks of a puppy's life developmentally speaking. During this time, exposing your pup to a variety of positive life experiences is the most important type of training you can undertake with her. For an older dog, you can do something similar called desensitization. It is important for both of these techniques to be introduced in a gentle, gradual manner. Positively reinforce acceptance of new and preferred behaviors and ease into each new situation. If a dog is isolated from the world, she has no opportunity to learn manners and proper behavior. Get your dog accustomed to being handled all over her body by everyone in the family, as well as friends, relatives, and your veterinarian.

**6) It's never too early or too late to begin training.**

Start the learning process the first day you take your dog home. Start today. Jump-start that bond by hand-feeding pieces of kibble throughout the day as a reward for good behavior. Try this for a few days and you should see a difference. You can teach an old dog new tricks; often it's the old dog who is the best learner.

**7) What motivates your dog?**

Is it food? Play? Walks? Your attention? Ask your dog to work for these things. It isn't cruel to ignore him when he demands these privileges by jumping or barking. Use plenty of whatever motives him to reinforce positive behavior, such as treats and praise--for example, for just lying in his bed on his own or chewing his toy. Seek out these good behaviors. Let him know what you want as well as what you don't want.

**8) It's easier to prevent unwanted behavior than to correct it.**

It's all about management. Avoid the problem or trigger for an unwanted behavior while teaching him what you do want. Put away food left out on the counter, confine him when you can't supervise him, put away the garbage. You do these things until you can set up exercises to train your dog to behave correctly. How much better to spend the first years in training and obedience classes and to work with your dog every day than to spend the rest of his life frustrated and yelling at him for not behaving the way you want--or worse, being put to death because you failed to teach him.

**9) Dogs don't understand right from wrong.**

They do understand safe from dangerous. They are not capable of being spiteful or stubborn, which can be mistaken for confusion, fearfulness, or anxiety. You know that look that people mistake for guilt in dogs?--"I know I was wrong"--in fact is reaction to your anger--"Please don't hurt me". Something to remember is that dogs do what works to get what they want, and less of what doesn't work.

**10) Most behavior issues are in fact communication problems.**

Just because a dog responds correctly to a command a few times doesn't mean she knows the command in all contexts and with distractions present, such as interesting smells, other dogs, new people. Dogs don't generalize well. It takes patience and practice to teach a dog to associate a behavior to a hand signal, then to a cue or command, and finally to obey under any circumstance. You wouldn't expect a French child to understand English, don't expect a dog to understand any verbal language at all. Most communication among dogs is through body language.

With an understanding of how to clearly communicate with your dog, you can help reduce the nation's sad animal shelter statistics and deepen the relationship with your canine best friend.

If you're experiencing aggression problems with your dog, please seek professional assistance. You can look online at APDT.COM (Association for Pet Dog Trainers) for a list of behaviorist/trainers near you.

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