

You CAN Teach Owners New Tricks

By Dr. Shannon Barrett, Island Veterinary Care

As school resumes, your children are not the only ones that benefit from education. Although “Sit”, “Stay”, “Come” may seem elementary training for your dog to know, it’s amazing how many dogs I encounter that have trouble with these basic commands. All dogs want to please their owners but often we have trouble communicating our needs to them. So as the kids are getting ready for school, now would be a great time to consider enrolling your pooch in some basic training.

From my personal experience I prefer group training, especially for younger dogs. It allows for puppy socialization in a controlled environment so they can learn to properly interact in the canine world and recognize signals from other dogs. Just ensure your dog is current on all their vaccines and that all puppies have completed their vaccine series prior to taking them to any public place.

There are several options for training classes that range from larger groups at PetSmart to small group training by local trainers. There is a big difference between a well-behaved dog at home and well-behaved dog in public. Picture your 6 year old child at a theme park - they might be a little preoccupied! It’s a similar situation for your dog in public places, sensory overload and lots of distractions! It makes it difficult for your furry friend to focus on you, especially if they are only accustomed to taking commands in the comfort of your home. I took our dog, Sullivan, to PetSmart training classes when he was a puppy and he had to learn to sit and stay in the front of the store while dogs and people strolled the isles. This training was definitely worth the cost and effort.

However his training didn’t end when we left the class, we also did a lot of training at home. If you are not sure where to start with training outside of the classroom, there is a great book called, *My Smart Puppy*, by Brian Kilcommons and Sarah Wilson. It includes a DVD and focuses on training through positive reinforcement. I still refer back to it when Sullivan “forgets” how to “come” (sometimes the thrall of seabirds are stronger than my requests to leave them alone). The combination of training at home plus formal classes or a trainer will provide the best results.

If you feel that you need more than once a week training classes, there are trainers that will come to your home such as Bark Busters to teach you and your dog. This is especially good for older pets that have aggression or barking issues. These

dogs may not be ready for group classes and may need a little more individual attention. Trainers that come to your house will teach *you* how to train your dog and are usually able to recognize triggers that prompt unwanted behaviors. For any trainer or class you choose, ask for references so you can get more information on their training style and results.



Giving your dog enough stimulation and exercise is also important. If they have a lot of pent up energy, it's much harder for them to focus. If your dog pulls on a leash as if they are trying to win the Iditarod, I recommend the Gentle Leader Easy Walk harness. It is a special harness that clips in the front of the chest. Since the leash clips on the chest, it gives you much better control. When your dog tries to pull, it pulls

him to the side instead of forward. The key is to make sure it fits snugly across the chest. It can be purchased at most pet retailers and I have been walking our 160 lb German shepherd on one since he was a puppy.

The most important aspects of training are consistency and positive reinforcement. If everyone in the household is training differently, your dog will become confused and you will become frustrated. Positive reinforcement is also important, spanking your dog or rubbing his nose in the carpet will only make your dog like YOU less!

Having a well-trained dog is extremely rewarding but requires a lot of work on your part. Working with your dog a few minutes a day to reinforce concepts they learned in class or from your trainer are key. Then frequently take your dog to public places (restaurants, beach) to ensure they focus on you despite distractions.

Someone once said "Properly trained, a man can be a dog's best friend." It's true, my husband and I have been well trained by our shepherd. Here's hoping your dog has the patience to teach you some new tricks!

Dr. Barrett owns Island Veterinary Care, a premier housecall service for the Charleston area. For more information, visit www.islandvetcare.com or call 843-628-1941.