

Integrative Veterinary Care

Controlling Resources

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There was a popular bumper sticker in the 1980's that read "He who dies with the most toys. . . wins." Canine social structure follows a similar precept – "He who controls the most resources. . . wins." A "resource" is anything that is valuable to your dog: food, praise, attention, toys, walks, prime sleeping spots, etc. In a dog pack, the most powerful dog controls who eats first (and therefore who gets the choicest portions), the prime sleeping spot, the order in which subordinates leave the den, etc. Being the pack leader doesn't have to mean yelling at your dog and rolling him over on his back or shaking him. We can become leader of the pack simply by controlling resources and avoiding sending signals to our dogs that indicate to them that they are in charge.

- **Control attention and play.** This means that if your dog comes over and puts his head in your lap, you do not immediately begin rubbing his ears. If he brings you a toy, you do not immediately start playing tug or fetch. Ask your dog to do something first – sit or down stay, or go to "place." The behavior you request needs to last at least 30 seconds before you reward your dog with the behavior he requested (this will hopefully allow him to forget that he asked). Better yet, randomly ask for behaviors so you can reward them immediately with petting or play! Controlling play also means enforcing rules – like dropping the fetch toy or releasing the tug toy on demand.
- **Control food.** This means asking for a stay or a wait prior to putting down the food dish. This also means not sharing directly from your plate during meals and asking your dog to stay out from underfoot while you're in the kitchen (use that "place" command!). Do not leave food out where your dog can learn to steal from you – this means kitchen counters, coffee tables, dinner tables, garbage cans, etc. You can treat your dog with a bit of people food when you're done with dinner or while you're cooking, provided that you have used the "place" command or a down stay.
- **Control sleeping spots.** This includes the middle of the hall. If your dog is lying in your way, do not step around him. Ask him to move. I use "excuse me" and prod with my toe. Eventually, with persistent prodding, your dog will get the idea. It's very convenient to be able to ask my Bernese Mountain Dog to move rather than trying to step over him while carrying groceries! Couches, recliners, and beds must also be controlled. If your dog is in "your" spot, you need to ask him to move (use "excuse me" or teach "get off" using the same lure-reward system we used for sit, down, and stand). If he won't move, you need to move him. You may want to leave a short six or eight inch tab leash on his collar to facilitate moving him. After you're settled, you can invite your dog to join you again if you wish.
- **Control walks.** Ask for a sit before your dog gets his leash put on. Ask for a wait before going out the door. Ask for waits at curbs when crossing the street. Ask for occasional random sits or downs. Always control the direction of travel – don't let your dog pull you! If possible, make a park part of your walking routine. Stop and work on obedience exercises (still behaviors, stays, recalls, heeling, tricks, fetching, etc) for a few minutes. If you can, take a long line (30 feet is usually ideal) and a fetch toy, and play fetch at the end of your obedience session.
- **Control yard access.** This only really applies if you don't have a doggie door. Ask for a wait before letting your dog in or out of the house into the yard. Develop a command that means "go outside" (via the lure-reward system) so you can send your dog out occasionally when it's not his idea.
- **Make your dog work for everything.** We all have to work for a living. Your dog's job is to do what you ask and be a companion. The companion part comes easily. The doing what you ask part takes some work on your part. Incorporating brief obedience exercises into your day to day life will make your dog more attentive and will strengthen your relationship with him by building a foundation of trust and respect.