

Realistic Expectations When Training Your Dog

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Our humorous look at what we as pet owners had to be thankful for at Thanksgiving gave examples of some of our pets' more out of control antics. Our descriptions may have given the impression that Ashley, Mocha (our Dalmatians) and Buffett our cat are ill-behaved nuisances much of the time. Such is not the case.

Buffett is an indoor cat and is allowed out in the backyard only under our supervision. He does from time to time sneak over the fence to visit our neighbors, but we discover him quickly and bring him back home.

Mocha, for the most part, is a couch potato, and when he gets into trouble it's usually because he's following Ashley's lead. Ashley however, is another story.

She is what we would call a difficult or "high maintenance" dog. For Ashley, and dogs like her, teaching her to respond reliably to commands so she doesn't do such things as dash out the door when it's open is going to be a life-long undertaking.

Many dog owners want their dogs to be reliable when it comes to obeying commands. They want to have voice control over their dogs when they are off-leash, they want them to avoid dashing through doors and gates when they are left open, they want their dogs to stay within the boundary of their yards even if they are not behind a fence (this violates leash laws in some areas), and they want their dogs to hold a "stay" position in the face of distractions.

Unfortunately, people too often expect this kind of reliability by the end of an eight week beginning obedience class. This is not realistic. We've been working with Ashley on obedience commands in the year and a half that we've had her.

She's much better than the completely untrained puppy she was, but she still has her lapses. Having your dog respond to your commands in situations where the temptation not to do so is strong, such as an open front door, requires a lot of practice. Obedience training a dog is not an eight week endeavor, but a life long one.

It requires repetitions, good step by step training methods which don't set performance standards that are more difficult than what the dog has actually learned, helping the dog generalize his training to respond correctly in many different environments and to ignore distractions. How well the dog learns and performs is highly dependent on how good are the methods used to teach him.

Training should be fun for both dog and owner. Methods that focus too much on leash and collar corrections and deny the value of rewards, including but not limited to food in training, may not be as beneficial. By January, 2000*, standards for humane dog training will be available to assist owners in finding trainers who use humane methods.

While obedience classes won't solve behavior problems such as separation anxiety, housesoiling, excessive barking or aggression, they are still an important tool in helping your dog be a better behaved pet who isn't a nuisance. A basic obedience or puppy class is only the beginning of training, not the end product.

*Since this article appeared, two publications have come out of this initial project.

1. Professional Standards for Dog Trainers: Effective, Humane Principles. Published by and available from the Delta Society, www.deltasociety.org

**Edited version first published in the Rocky Mountain News, Denver, CO.
Any use of this article must cite the authors and the Rocky Mountain News**

2. Guide to Humane Dog Training. Published by and available from American Humane Association, www.americanhumane.org

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