

Does “Spoiling” Dogs Cause Behavior Problems?

Daniel Estep, Ph.D. and Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D.

www.AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com

Copyright ABA, Inc.

We recently spoke with the owner of a Jack Russell terrier. “Jake”, as we’ll call him, was in the habit of going to bed earlier than his owners. When they would attempt to get into bed, Jake would growl and snap at them. From Jake’s view of the world, the bed was his, and he was not inclined to share it. As pet owners, we all must make concessions to accommodate normal doggie behaviors such as some digging in the yard, barking at cats at 2 am, counter surfing, and the occasional leg-lifting to mark territory. However, for some dogs and their owners, there comes a point where the dogs are calling the shots more often than not.

Jake had developed such an attitude problem, that he was essentially playing king of the hill. Not only had he decided whether or not his owners could use the bed, he was also deciding which visitors he would and would not allow to enter the house. Jake was taking his owners for walks and would not tolerate brushing or nail trims. When not making crucial decisions about the running of the household, Jake could be a very affectionate and loving dog. His owners were worried that perhaps they had spoiled him.

If by spoiling we mean indulging your dog, we would venture to guess that many dogs are spoiled, including our own. Spoiling in and of itself isn’t necessarily a problem. When your dog however is controlling your behavior, and you have very little ability to control his, the relationship is in trouble.

You don’t have to be a bully, deprive your dog of things he enjoys, or use intimidating methods to obtain good behavior. In fact, these types of approaches often do more harm than good. Your dog should want to follow your lead, not because he is afraid of what will happen if he doesn’t, but because he happily anticipates ‘good things’ will come his way for doing so. The goal is to not only make it easy for your dog to make the right behavioral choice, but also to make the reward so compelling that your dog can’t help but do what you want.

Most pet owners are subjected to a wealth of conflicting information about what procedures to use to have a well-behaved canine companion. If you are confused about how best to train your dog, or have tried a variety of methods unsuccessfully, visit our website for more information. Help for cat owners is also included.