

Working Dog Management

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Trainers and handlers who have handled working dogs for 10 or more years automatically keep their dogs in certain ways to minimize problems. They know how to set up the dog's environment and daily handling so the dog has the best chance to learn good behaviors and avoid learning bad behaviors. This type of environmental, situational and behavioral "management" is what I am calling "dog management."

When you've raised and trained dogs for 25 or more years, you forget how much you had to learn about management until new handlers ask: "How do you housebreak my dog?" Or, "How do I keep the dog from tearing my house up when I leave?" Or, "How do I stop my dog from barking in the patrol car?"

These are basic problems that are best prevented by starting dog management on the first day a handler receives a dog. When a dog is given to a new owner and taken to a new home, his world turns upside down. The dog has no relationship with the new handler and no reason to like, respect or obey the new person. Until a new handler or owner establishes a relationship with the dog, he should not expect much from the dog.

If the dog has previously been trained or lived in a house with people, the handler probably has less to worry about. However, many dogs come from kennels or owners who kept them kenneled outside, so they don't know how to live in a house, and many, unfortunately, don't know how to relate to people well. They may be aloof, rebellious, independent or submissive. It is the handler's job to be a partner, leader and friend to the dog.

Good handler/dog relationships are built with positive reinforcement. A relationship between a dog and handler is analogous to a bank account. When the two first meet, the account balance is zero. The handler needs to put many positive deposits in the account by giving to and doing good things with the dog before the handler has to make corrections or "withdrawals" from the account. If the account has a negative balance, the dog will become afraid of or aggressive towards the handler. A strong positive balance, over time, will earn interest for the relationship, so that the dog will need less and less training and will find the work itself and the presence of the handler

positively reinforcing. Such dogs know when their handlers are proud of them and respond in kind.

When the account is zero, the handler needs to avoid having to correct the dog. This means setting up the dog's living environment so that the dog doesn't get in trouble. New dogs, especially strong willed working dogs who have lived their previous life in a kennel, don't know they can't get into the trash, aren't supposed to chase (or kill) the cat, pee on the sofa, bark at the neighbors, etc., etc. The better the working temperament they have, the more mischief they are likely to get into. They are just being dogs. Jean Donaldson in her book, "Culture Clash" sums this up with a list of items and how a dog perceives them, for example:

	<u>Human</u>	
<u>Dog</u>		
Furniture		Chew Toy
Shoes		Chew Toy
Car Chase		Thing To
Carpet		Toilet
Food	Dog	Food
Counter	Steak on	Food
Kleenex		Food
Book		Chew Toy
Cat Chase		Thing to
Ground	Plastic Wrap on	Food
Speakers	Hi Fi	Chew Toy
Speakers Male	Hi Fi	Toilet for Intact

Over time, with proper management and training, a handler can teach a dog to adapt to and live with humans, but this can't be done in the first day, week or sometimes even within a month of when the dog first arrives. It takes time and commitment from the handler and his family. Ideally, the first few days a dog arrives at home, the handler should have most of that day and the next few to spend with the dog, as well as a kennel, crate or other safe area to confine the dog in when the handler can't be personally supervising the dog.

Safe Confinement

Safe confinement means a place the dog cannot get out of that doesn't have anything in it that the handler doesn't mind having chewed up or urinated on, and a place that has some positive association for the dog. By positive association, I mean a place that the dog will feel comfortable in or may be made to feel comfortable in. Dogs are social animals. They are hard wired to need social contact with other pack mates. For working dogs, their pack should be their handler and family instead of other dogs. One of the most distressing things that can happen to a dog is to be put in a kennel or place where there is no contact with his pack mates or no anticipation of such contact. Imagine if you were traveling in a foreign country and suddenly seized, thrown in a cell and left in solitary confinement. Being separated from social contact is very traumatic for puppies.

Dogs and puppies are best confined in a safe area close to family activities where they can see what the family members are doing but not be a nuisance. A simple, large wire crate or exercise pen with newspapers on the floor in a corner of the kitchen or family room is an excellent place to confine a pup. An older dog should be afforded the same courtesy if possible. They may be confined behind a baby gate or tethered in a safe place near the family.

Most partially trained dogs that are purchased for police service have been confined to a crate or transport box at some point. They might not like the confinement, but at least they don't panic. If a handler gets a dog that has never been in a crate, he needs to teach the dog to use and like a crate. A crate allows for safe transport of the dog in vehicle, planes, boats, etc., and is a safe place to put the dog when a patrol vehicle is not available or feasible. The crate can be the dog's second, portable home when the handler stays with relatives, in motels, etc., and a place to park the dog when visitors come to the house or the dog can't be underfoot.

The reason dogs dislike being confined in a crate or an outside kennel is because, unless the handler makes it happen, nothing good happens to the dog in the crate or kennel. If all that happens is the

dog is led out to the kennel on lead, pushed inside, the door closed and the handler leaves, the only thing the dog knows is that he is left alone when he is in the kennel. Handlers need to put food treats in the kennel or crate, bones or chews the dog really likes to chew on, feed the dog in the kennel or crate, play with the dog in the kennel, etc. Make good things happen in the kennel. From the time they were puppies, all my dogs got a treat nearly every time they went into a crate or kennel. At first, the treat was thrown in with the door left open, then the pups were fed in the crate, then treats thrown in, the door shut and treats stuffed through the wire and the pup immediately let out, etc., progressing until the pup was spending 30 seconds, then a minute then five minutes shut in, etc., until it was clear to me the puppy didn't resent being in the crate. In fact, if you pick up a dog treat in my living room and look at the crates, all three of my dogs dive into their crates and stay there, looking out of the doors to see what will happen next. When I pick up a nice, juicy bone and start outside, they all run to the outside kennel and through the door, waiting for their bone. Sure, they want to be let out when I get home, but I don't ever have any problems getting them to go in.

Food is a very powerful training and conditioning tool. The handler should always feed his own dog and not leave this chore to another family member. The handler should be aware that wherever he feeds his dog will become a very positive place for the dog, so this can be used to help the dog become accustomed to or like places like a kennel, vehicle or crate.

Teach the Dog to Tolerate Being Alone

German Shepherds and other working breeds are notorious for problems with separation anxiety. Once they bond to a pack leader, they want to stay with that leader whenever possible. If they are not taught that the leader may leave for periods of time and come back, they may stress out. Even if a dog does not become stressed or anxious, they almost always "experiment" with behaviors to get attention and bring their owners back, like incessant barking. Teaching the dog to stay alone means teaching them to stay and not engage in unnecessary barking, destructive chewing, etc. Of course, a bored dog will always chew, dig or find some way to amuse himself, so if a dog is to be left alone for any length of time, the dog either needs to be provided with chew toys or other acceptable means of entertainment. A better strategy is for the handler to exercise the dog long enough to make the dog tired enough to settle down and sleep when left alone in a quiet place.

Teaching the dog to stay alone is approached the same as teaching the dog to stay in confinement, except that the dog may be confined to an area or tied by a leash and the handler leaves the dog's sight and hearing. Like crate training, the staying alone training should be done gradually with positive reinforcement for remaining quiet and composed while the handler leaves. Start with very short periods of time and progress to long periods as the dog learns. The handler needs to convince the dog that he will always come back for the dog. The handler also needs to return when the dog is behaving well. If the handler returns, yells at or gives attention to the dog when the dog starts barking or some other obnoxious behavior, the dog will learn that barking brings the handler back. Obviously this training needs to be done in a place where the dog can be restrained or confined safely and where people will not complain if the dog barks or carries on. The handler can have other people present to watch the dog to prevent problems that might arise. Again, unless the dog is in real danger or showing signs of severe stress, the handler needs to ignore the dog when the dog barks and return when the dog is quiet. An exception to this rule would be if the dog is barking out of stress, panic or the need to relieve himself. This is where the handler has to use his or her best judgment to determine why the dog is barking.

German trainers have had a tradition of tying their young dogs out during the training of older dogs. The young dogs may learn something from watching the other dogs, but one valuable skill they learn is to be at a distance or away from their handlers for periods of time. They usually don't get bored at training because there is plenty to watch, but they do learn that the handler may come and go without negative consequences.

The same strategy works for barking in a patrol vehicle. If silence is the dog's behavior when the handler returns, the dog will be convinced that silence brings the handler back. Some high-energy dogs will bark just to expend energy, but most mature dogs conserve energy and don't bark if it doesn't accomplish anything. If a dog starts barking unnecessarily in a patrol vehicle because of excitement or stress, the handler needs to address the problem promptly, because it becomes much harder to cure with time. The dog can be taught a quiet command with positive reinforcement and taught obedience commands in the vehicle and around the vehicle. Using a bark collar may work for some dogs, but for others it just adds to their stress and makes things worse. I have seen some young dogs that were fitted with bark collars lose the defense drive they need for protection work because the collar shocked them each time they barked in a protective mode.

For high energy dogs, teaching the dog that “down” means you can’t bark can allow the handler to shut the dog up when he needs to. This command also becomes useful for dogs that learn to bark constantly during bite work, giving the handler a way to rest and “park” the dog so he can converse with others, as well as allowing an unfocused dog to quiet down and control himself.

Exercise, Exercise, Exercise

Canine behavioral consultants have a saying: “A tired dog is a good dog.” Good working dogs have high energy, confidence and intelligence levels. If they are not kept occupied physically and mentally, their energy leaks out into behaviors that cause problems. Even puppies and young dogs will settle down and sleep for long periods of time if they are exercised enough. “Enough” can seem like an endless period when the handler lacks time, but adequate exercise with the handler will prevent behavior problems and help to fill the relationship account. Exercise keeps the working dog in the good physical shape he needs to be in to perform and prevent injuries and also helps to keep the handler in shape. An hour of training or exercise is usually adequate for an adult dog, but two is better for a dog under a year and a half. The more enjoyable “mental” exercise the dog can get as part of the process, the better. Training, playing with toys with the handler, a run or walk in the woods and exposure to new environments keep the dog from being bored and tire the dog out mentally and physically.

Restraint

It should go without saying that a police dog in training that does not reliably come when called should be kept on a leash or let loose only in safe areas. This is to keep the dog safe as well as the public and other animals, and to help prevent the dog from discovering that he can run away from his handler before the handler has established enough positive balance in the relationship account so that the dog wants to stay with the handler. If the dog is starting to prefer to stay around the handler instead of wander off, the handler can progress from a leash held in the hand to a light, strong long line that the dog drags along that the handler can catch or step on if needed. For training programs that use electric collars extensively, the long line is needed until the basic training to teach the dog to come is finished.

Trade

Working dogs should be taught to “trade” or give up items that they have in exchange for a food treat or other item. If taught this early, they are less likely to play a keep away game and to resent being taught to give up or “out” things later on. The command “Leave it,” when properly taught, is a variation of trade. Trading helps handlers to manage tough dogs that don’t want to give something up for nothing and may start a physical fight when the handler tries to take something away.

Grooming

Police dogs need to accept handling and grooming by their handlers and other dog professionals. This should be taught early with positive reinforcement and careful handling before the dog starts bite work and learns that “combat” with people might be acceptable. Work with groomers and veterinarians that have to work with the dog during his career and make trips to those establishments positive or at least tolerable for the dog.

Who grooms who and when communicates social status in the canine world. A handler should be able to handle and groom his dog whenever he chooses, assuming the dog is not being caused undue discomfort. Most dogs learn to like grooming, and some become pests about being petted and fussed over. If a dog becomes a pest about being petted and played with, the handler needs to be aware that if the dog always determines when he is petted, he will assume that the handler is showing submission to him. Occasionally make a point of not petting the dog when he asks for it to show the dog that the handler determines when the dog will be petted, not the dog. If the dog persists in being a pest after verbal warnings from the handler, the handler should make his communication clear by getting up and walking toward the dog slowly and with purpose, using the handler’s personal space and presence to push the dog back away from where the handler was sitting. This will get the message across to most dogs, even if it has to be done more than once.

Settling Down

All young working dogs that have to live with people need to be reinforced for simply lying down and being quiet. Instead of petting the dog when he pesters the handler, the handler should make a point of petting and giving treats and toys to the dog when he settles down

somewhere and stays quiet. This reinforces a desirable house behavior rather than giving the dog attention when he is active or obnoxious.

Preventing Problems

Preventing behavior problems is done much more easily by encouraging acceptable behavior rather than trying to change problem behaviors after they develop. Training acceptable behaviors is not hard, but, as humans, we make the mistake of paying attention to our dogs more when they are a problem rather than paying attention to them when they are quiet and well behaved. Behavior is usually easily modified by the following rules: Dogs will do something if it brings them positive reinforcement and, although they may experiment with a behavior once or twice, they will not persist in doing things that don't bring positive reinforcement. They will not persist in behaviors that bring discomfort or negatives to them, but the handler of a new dog needs to avoid negatives because he has to remain a positive force in his dog's mind. Each problem behavior should be analyzed by the handler to determine what the dog is getting for positive reinforcement. If the handler can reduce or eliminate that positive reinforcement, he can cause the problem behavior to fade away. Often dogs engage in problem behaviors because, like children, it is the only way they can get attention.

There are some behaviors that are driven by the dog's emotional or physiological traits that can be hard to understand and require expert help to fix. I encourage police dog handlers to read as many books and view as many videotapes as they can on dog behavior, training and human/dog interactions so they can understand some of these traits. Many of the popular training books are very informative and entertaining. One of these is Culture Clash by Jean Donaldson. Another very good author is Patricia B. McConnell, Ph.D.

The information to prevent problems is out there in print, and possessed by many experienced dog trainers and handlers. Before you get a working dog, take the time to research proper dog and puppy management so you and the dog will have the greatest chance at success.