



Engaging Owners Fully in Dog Training: Attitudes and Skills That Work

(Part 2 of 2)

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Imagine for a moment that you are an owner with a leash reactive dog going to a trainer for help. Although you've owned dogs your whole life, you've never encountered this problem before. It started unexpectedly while walking your dog in the park, and it has escalated to the point where you avoid walking anywhere near other people or dogs. You have just described your dog's worrisome behaviors to the trainer. Now consider the following three trainers' first reactions to your plight:

Trainer 1: "You're holding the leash wrong—way too tight, and that's not the right type of collar. The dog feels your anxiety down the leash. Loosen up!"

Trainer 2: "Your dog feels anxious, and the leash is cutting off her main option. She wants to move away and avoid the stimulus, but the leash holds her there. You need to watch for the moment that the dog freezes in that situation, tell her to sit, and give her yummy treats so she associates the stimulus with good things."

Trainer 3: "Sounds like it's scary and embarrassing when your dog acts that way. It's natural to tense up—I've done it myself—but we need to find a way to loosen you up a bit so the dog doesn't feel your anxiety on top of hers. Let's try some things together that will help counteract all the anxiety that you both feel in these situations and give you some options."

Each of these trainers wants the owner to learn the same thing, but one approach is much more likely to be successful. Trainer One might be right, but the communication is full of criticism and offers no owner-friendly solution. When people feel criticized, they become defensive. Defensiveness closes communication channels. Most owners in this scenario would experience negative reactions that would impair their ability to hear Trainer One's intended message. Trainer Two educates the owner about the dog and moves quickly to practical solutions. This approach is adequate and would probably work, but it omits an important aspect of the problem: the owner's reactions. Those emotions

surrounding the dog's behavior still have the potential to cloud the trainer's message. The owner might be thinking, "I'm not sure the trainer really understands how awful this is!" Trainer Three is much more likely to engage the owner fully in the training and problem-solving process. Without dwelling on it excessively, Trainer Three acknowledges and validates the owner's feelings, thereby "normalizing" them. The trainer's attentiveness and sensitivity to the owner's reactions permits the owner to drop defensiveness and take part in the practical solutions to come. Furthermore, the trainer suggests a collaborative process of trying and evaluating options. Although no single approach works best for all people, Trainer Three is likely to work well with the widest range of owners.

Training Goals for Owners

Just as dog trainers have clear goals for the dogs they train, they need to have goals in mind for the owners. Keeping these goals in mind helps focus training activities toward success. It seems that five important goals are to help owners (1) become engaged and motivated for training, (2) understand more about canine behavior, (3) try new behaviors or reverse counterproductive behaviors with their dogs, (4) discuss openly any questions or objections that might interfere with progress, and (5) take responsibility for their dog's training and follow-through at home.

Effective Training Model

Before considering specific skills dog trainers can use to accomplish these owner-related goals, it might be useful to review one of the most effective, research-based models for training humans in any complex skill. Many dog trainers use similar methods, but it's valuable to review one's approach periodically to see if it can be improved. The model involves four basic steps: explanation, demonstration, skills practice, and feedback. In the explanation phase, the trainer briefly ➤

provides necessary information and gives a rationale for the skill being taught. Next, the trainer demonstrates the skill, preferably live with one of the owners' dogs or a demo dog. The bulk of training time is then devoted to owner skills practice. The owner tries the new behavior as the trainer observes. The trainer gives some feedback in the moment but doesn't overwhelm the owner with it, and there is a brief, dedicated feedback time immediately following the practice session. During this debriefing, the trainer asks for and listens to the owner's reactions, gives several specific examples of what the owner did well, and makes a couple suggestions for improvements. An example of feedback after a training session follows.

Trainer: "Kasha is pretty challenging, but you stuck with it. Nice try! What did you think?"

Owner: "It wasn't too bad. I have trouble holding the leash loosely though. I automatically tighten up when other people or dogs are nearby."

Trainer: "It's hard to change old habits, especially because you're worried about her lunging, but at least you're aware of it—that's half the battle! I think you did a great job keeping her at the right distance from the other dogs, and you noticed it immediately when she tensed up. I liked the way you used a firm but calm voice telling her to sit, and you praised her right away when she did. That's all terrific. Keep that up, and now let's try that again and concentrate on keeping the leash loose through it all. You'll get it with a bit more practice."

Skills to Maximize Owner Involvement and Success

Most dog-friendly trainers know how to set dogs up for success in training. Owners need the same thing, and there are several skills trainers can use to ensure that the people succeed, too.

Listen and Motivate

It might seem clichéd to say, but listening well is vital. Attentive listening not only helps set training goals, but also establishes the rapport and relationship between you and owner that's needed for the best outcomes. Most owner resistance arises from anxiety or emotional reactions that are not acknowledged. Empathic listening, in which you briefly summarize aloud (in your own words) what the owner has said, including an understanding of the owner's emotional reactions, is well worth mastering. For example, you might show your understanding by saying to an owner, "You're really frustrated with the way Roscoe keeps jumping up on people, and you need it to stop."

After listening carefully, you are in a better position to motivate owners for the training process by answering the unspoken owner question, "What's in it for me?" This is done by explaining *explicitly* how training will meet the needs that owners have expressed. For example, you might say, "Dogs often jump up in greeting—it's a doggie thing, but by our standards, not very polite. If we train Roscoe

in basic obedience, including how to sit on cue no matter how excited he is, then we can teach him to sit whenever greeting people. How does that sound?"

Educate

Owners are more likely to follow through when they have a basic understanding of why their dogs behave as they do and what the rationale is for the intervention. Education is important, but it should be relatively short, to the point, and presented in simple, straightforward language. Although some owners might be interested in theory and research, most are more interested in practical solutions. Owners tend to understand better when you provide information in terms of *their* specific dogs, such as, "When Candy starts whining when you leave home, she might be responding to some signals you are giving her. It sounds like you pet her, give her treats, and then say goodbye several times, trying to reassure her. I know that you're trying to make her feel better, but unintentionally you might be communicating 'This is a big deal. I'm leaving you now. It's time to get worried.' Then she reacts, and you feel even worse. I'd like to suggest some ways to break that cycle and get her used to your coming and going. From now on, when you leave I want you to avoid saying goodbye, and we're going to help Candy by leaving and returning in short little bursts at first. It might be hard to break old habits, but let's give it a try."

Use Behavioral Shaping

In some ways, changing human behavior is quite similar to changing canine behavior. It is best done incrementally. Whatever the task, if it can be broken into smaller steps, people learn more quickly and retain what they have learned. When you look for and reinforce small steps in the right direction, owners gain confidence, knowing they are on the right track. This helps maintain their motivation. Just as we do when training a dog to perform a complex behavior, we need to break down the behaviors we are teaching to owners into smaller steps that can be accomplished more readily. Whenever you have trouble with an owner who keeps failing despite trying, it is a signal that you should break the behavior—and *your feedback*—down into smaller increments.

Apply Reinforcement Skillfully

In order to stay motivated and reduce their anxiety, people need to know they are on the right track. Many of us tend to see problems in other people's behavior much more readily than what they are doing well, so to use reinforcement effectively sometimes takes concentrated effort. The more that you notice and comment on what owners are doing correctly, though, the more quickly they learn. For example, you might notice that an owner frequently reprimands the dog by scolding and yanking the leash. In light of this obvious flaw, it might take extra effort to notice something that the owner is doing correctly, such as the few times he or she praises the dog or refrains *[continued on next page]*

from reprimanding: “That last time you stayed quiet and ignored the behavior. That’s just what we’re looking for. Keep working on that and it’ll get easier!” Train yourself to recognize and praise owners’ low-frequency positive behaviors and even the absence of improper behaviors, and you’re likely to see real progress.

Perhaps the most common “high value reward” for owners is sincere, specific praise. Without sincerity and specificity, praise can be viewed as manipulative or condescending. Even with owners who are struggling, you can sincerely praise them for those small incremental improvements noted in the section on shaping. (*Secret #1: When you compare their current skills to the desired outcome of polished dog handling skills, you might be at a loss to find anything to get excited about, but when you compare their current skills to their prior performance, you can usually find many small signs of progress to praise. Using this different “yardstick” is the key to being able to give sincere praise.*)

Being specific with your praise gives owners what a click gives dogs: more precise information about what aspects of their behavior to continue. Consider the difference between “that’s good—you’re getting it” and “I really like how you are using a firm tone of voice without raising your voice now—terrific!” You need not be specific about everything you say, but some specific feedback helps owners learn better.

Remember that people, like their dogs, learn new tasks when given lots of feedback and maintain those behaviors with intermittent feedback. The praise shouldn’t stop; it can be tapered off as owners “get it.” Once owners master a skill, the dog’s response becomes the primary reward for the owner.

Give Tactful Suggestions for Improvement

Owners do need to know which of their behaviors are counterproductive, but providing corrective information can be tricky. When owners get defensive, they stop listening and lose motivation. (*Secret #2: The most tactful way to make corrections is to tell people what you want them to do instead of what they are doing. This is the human equivalent of telling a dog to “sit” upon greeting people rather than “off.”*) Most people can concentrate on just one or two major suggestions per session. In terms of frequency, praise should outweigh suggestions at least 3:1!

Laugh and Be Playful

A lighter tone during training goes far in alleviating owner anxiety and improving motivation. A positive use of humor and playfulness helps everyone relax, including the dogs! If we want dogs to be calm and relaxed, we need to help their owners feel that way, too, and laughter is one of the best anti-stress mechanisms around!

Conclusion

This two-part article was designed to share some of the attitudes and methods therapists have used successfully with parents that can be used by dog trainers working with owners. Humans and their relationships tend to be complex, and no single ingredient can ensure success with owners. Most likely, it is the *combined* use of the various suggestions here that help set the tone for more enjoyable and effective owner training.

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