

Article 14

Communication key to quality training.

Dear Gus,

I have been working with my dog and a trainer for several months, and I feel that the trainer is constantly criticizing my handling of my dog. Since we are in a group class this is becoming embarrassing and it's taking the motivation out of training for me. Is this type of treatment necessary and acceptable from a trainer?

Christine B, Orange

Dear Christine,

In my experience, the most important part of training your dog is developing a human-companion animal bond. Many times "bad behavior" on the part of your pet may just be a lack of understanding of what is normal species-typical behavior, for example, pack dominance behavior. You should have a frank and open discussion with your current trainer about what is the goal of your pet's training and how to accomplish these goals. For example, if you have a dominant dog, and you behave in a compliant or "laid back" manner to the dog, you are unwittingly contributing to your dog's negative behavior. So, the trainer may be focusing on you to try to change this behavior to where you are the pack leader.

Another example is that anxious owners transmit their anxiety to their pet, telling them there is something to be anxious about. So, most likely, your trainer's goal is to have you become the dominant member of the pack and to give a clear message to your pet.

As a trainer, I have sometimes "picked on" an owner for these types of behaviors, with the goal of pointing out how their behavior reinforces the negative behaviors of their pets. But corrections to the owners should not be done in a way that is demeaning to the owner, just as a correction to a pet should not be punitive. I try to teach my clients how to communicate with their own pets, generally saying the same thing many ways, with the goal of the owner having the ability to communicate with their pet, and stimulate their pet in a willing and happy manner. So, I recommend a very -open discussion with your trainer about what he or she sees as the issues with you and your canine companion, so that you can better understand, and hopefully accept what your trainer is communicating to you. If you are not able to reach agreement on the goals for your training sessions, it might be best to work with a trainer where you feel you have a better fit of your human to human communication styles.

I hope this helps improve both your communication with your trainer, and with your pet.

Gus.

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