

Impulse control is hallmark of well-trained dog

Not many dogs come with a natural ability to control their impulses. They spot a cat, they run to it. They find food, they eat it. They see something exciting, they bark at it.

Puppies and untrained dogs do what they want, when they want, just like out-of-control 2-year-old kids.

When it comes right down to it, though, inhibiting impulses is a big part of what it takes to be a trained dog, a well-behaved child or a trustworthy citizen.

Surprisingly, the essence of a well-trained dog is not found in the robotic ability to perform commands but rather in a dog's ability to control basic desires. Teaching your dog basic obedience is fundamental, but the difference between trained and well-trained lies in a dog's ability to find self-control.

Because impulse control isn't innate, it must be taught by starting with small challenges and building to higher levels of difficulty. With that in mind, you can begin teaching impulse control by working through these steps:

Step 1: Teach your dog to ask for attention, not demand it. Teach him that jumping on you, pawing at you or barking at you for attention doesn't work. When your dog is demanding, find a way to remove any benefit that there might be for the behavior. If you walk through the door and your dog jumps on you, turn right back around and leave. Repeat this until he figures out that jumping isn't working. If your dog barks at you for attention, calmly put him in the laundry room, bathroom or a crate for a few minutes for a time-out. Be sure to reward your dog for good behavior, such as sitting politely for petting. By controlling the consequences of your dog's actions, you can help him work toward better impulse control.

Step 2: Sit and stay for meals. This is a surprisingly easy exercise, even for dogs that haven't learned the stay command. Prepare your dog's meal as usual. While holding the food bowl, tell your dog to sit and then give the stay command. Lower the bowl to the ground at normal speed (by lowering it slowly or in a jerky fashion, you actually make the sit/stay more difficult to maintain.) If your dog gets up, raise the food bowl back up and put her back into a sit/stay. You will need to repeat this a few times before your dog realizes that getting up causes the food bowl to go away. Once he can maintain a stay for a few seconds, release him with "OK." You can gradually extend the length of time you expect your dog to maintain the sit/stay or even practice leaving the room and returning before releasing him.

Step 3: Sit and stay at the door. Teach your dog that the only way to earn access to the outdoors is to control the impulse to bolt and then wait for your release ("OK"). Put your dog into the sit/stay position and open the door. If your dog moves to get up, immediately close the door.

Repeat this until your dog can wait calmly with the door open before you release him. If your dog is especially adept at slipping through the door, clip on a leash for added safety.

We teach our children to mature by learning to control outbursts and focus on tasks. We require people to abide by laws and regulations so that we can function better as a society. Learning to control impulses, such as throwing a temper tantrum in the second grade or punching out the guy with the ringing cellphone at the movies is all part of growing up. Why would we ask less of our dogs?

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