

The Three D's of Dog Training

by Robin Sockness

One thing I strive to point out at every opportunity when working with clients is the importance of developing a relationship with your dog and setting your dog up for success. Relationship based dog training is actually teaching more than training – it is like being a good parent. It is like raising children. As parents you want to set your children up for success – same with your dog.

All too often, we set our dogs up for failure. We ask them to learn to sit in the middle of a park full of screaming children and frisky squirrels before they have learned to sit in the quiet of our living room. We ask them to walk perfectly on a leash while out in the middle of a dog park when we haven't perfected leash walking yet at home in our back yards. We may expect our dogs NOT to jump on people when we have not taught them some other way to greet people. That is what I call "setting the dog up for failure", and it can start a vicious circle of frustration for both you and your dog which breaks down the relationship.

Think of dog training like the school system. Start with something easy! Start teaching your dog in kindergarten and gradually move up to college level training. When your dog masters the small steps, build on that success and ask for something a little more complicated. Sometimes, just like children, your dog may have to repeat a course of training before moving on. It's not fair to ask your dog for something more complicated when s/he could not master the basics.

Here is a good formula to use.

I call it the 3 D's: Duration — Distance — Distractions

First, teach the behavior without any distractions! Then, gradually increase the time (duration) still without distractions. Gradually add in distance/distractions - starting with short distance and minor distractions. Then, combine difficulty, put distance and distractions together. Do not move to the next step until the last step has been mastered. If your dog has trouble with any of the steps, go back to the previous step.

Always be very clear with your instructions and consistent with follow through.

Reinforce when your dog gets it right with treats and lots of praise.

If your dog gets it wrong, don't punish him/her. I like to use the words "uh oh" or "sorry" – nor "oops" not saying them unkindly, but letting the dog know that they didn't get it right.

Don't make your dog guess! Provide constant feedback.

Pay attention to your dog's body language when training! If s/he is stressed in training sessions, you will need to modify your training approach or end the session and try again later.

Make learning fun...for the both of you!