

Clients often say to me, “How can I get my dog to pay attention to me? Why won’t s/he pay attention to me?” How can I build my dog’s confidence? My dog has some behavioral issues that need to be addressed!

There is a very simple thing that will produce a fast and huge change in your dog's behavior — **hand feed your dog!** Yes, put the food bowl away for a month and feed all meals by hand! When you hand feed your dog, you make yourself very important, you can teach bite inhibition and you will gain your dog's undivided attention!

Making yourself important to your dog is a good thing. Some call it being a “leader”. I call it being a good pet parent. Hand feeding is going to very quickly make your dog understand that without you, he/she might not get fed! This is a great way to bond with and build a relationship with your dog. It is especially effective when a dog is new to your family.

How does hand feeding help with bite inhibition? Your dog should learn to be careful with his/her mouth. Hand feeding provides you the perfect opportunity to focus on giving pieces of dry dog food, one or two at a time, and teaching the command “gentle” or “easy”. If your dog touches your finger with his/her teeth, pull back, say “ouch” and then use your calm voice to say “gentle” and then try feeding again. So, simply by hand feeding your dog, you are teaching soft mouth skills.

It sure does make sense that hand feeding your dog would help get your dog to pay attention to you, right? Why is that important? Well, dogs, just like people tend to pay way more attention to the person in their lives that doles out the rewards. They focus on the person in their life that is important to them. When you look at the relationship between you and your dog, and determining who controls the resources, you can put yourself right at the top of the list of people your dog needs to survive.

You need to be very important to your dog. This is very benevolent parenting. The goal here is to be necessary in your dog’s life, not control that life! None of us want robot dogs, but we want our dogs to look to use for guidance and for us to be relevant to our dogs.

So how do you do this? Pick a spot on the floor- it can be where your dog eats now, or better yet, for socialization purposes, you can feed him in different areas of the house – even outside! Meals on wheels is fun...take some kibble with you when you go on a walk or are out for socialization – “to go” food! Start by handing out the kibble here and there without asking your dog to do anything.

Make sure NOT to reward bad behavior. Pay your dog for sitting nicely or for being polite. Dogs learn by association and will repeat behaviors they get rewarded for. If you give your dog kibble when s/he is jumping up, barking, pawing at you, etc., you are rewarding inappropriate behavior.

Ask your dog to stand or sit patiently before you hand feed him/her. Once the dog has the routine down, start asking him/her to do things for the food. Sit! Watch me! Down! Shake! Spin! Hand feeding helps with recall. A dog that is hand fed will almost always come to your hand if you put it out! Use feeding time to work on the training skills you learned in class.

It doesn't have to be just one person in the house that is hand feeding your dog as long as the food is pre-measured so you don't over feed. You will be truly amazed at the bonding and understanding that kids and dogs have when they hand feed the dog.

Have you ever seen the dogs that never take their eyes off their owners – always paying attention on walks and when out and about? Looking for guidance in situations? Hand feeding is a positive way to accomplish that. Hand feeding is especially beneficial when you bring a new dog into your home. Your dog will bond to you very quickly when you are the person with all the resources.

So, put down the food bowl and bond with your dog!

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