

The Zen of Dog Training, Part 2

The Human Ingredient

By Kimberly Artley

Dog training is far more than teaching a dog to sit, stay, lie down, roll over or give up a paw. It's about partnership. Relationship. Creating mutual understanding and rapport. Reverence. Loyalty. The symbiotic exchange of trust, respect, energy and love.

We have a responsibility, you see, for these amazing living, breathing, feeling beings we domesticated thousands of years ago. For providing what they need to achieve sound health and well-being in body and mind. What dogs are trying to tell us through their actions and behavior, however, and what most people are misinterpreting or missing all together, is that we aren't holding up our end of the bargain. Especially here in America. And, sadly, millions of dogs are paying the ultimate price for this every single year.

The Human Ingredient. We play a big role in the conditioning and influencing of our dogs' mental and emotional state, and their overall health. How else are they supposed to learn how to behave and what's expected of them if we don't teach them? It's up to us to learn how to meet their instinctual needs as a canine, then work to fulfill them—daily. *(Please see Part 1 of this article on page 28 of our Winter/Holiday 2014 edition.)*

We, and we alone, are responsible for the energy we bring into each space. The energy through which we approach life, teach and discipline, guide and direct with. Are we nervous? Tense? Anxious? Stressed out? Feeling frustrated or impatient? Dogs will not instinctively trust, respect and follow this type of energy. They will, however, trust, respect and follow calm, patient, grounded (read: unemotional), confident energy. This is how dogs teach us to constantly self-check, be more cognizant of how we're feeling and what we're projecting. The energy we share with our dogs is a direct message to them; and if this is a daily constant, way of life and consistent source from which they're receiving their guidance, you better believe it's going to impact their behavior and how they perceive the world around them.

What “family” is to us, “pack” is to them; and when we welcome a dog into our home, we’re welcoming in a new family or pack member. Every human family has a “Head of Household,” “Parent” or “Parental Unit,” like every canine pack has a “Head of the Pack,” “Alpha Dog” or “Alpha Pair.” All work to provide their dependents with structure and order. Setting and enforcing rules, boundaries and parameters. Teaching and guiding their youth as they grow and mature; preparing them for the real world, and empowering them to become self-directive, self-sufficient and productive, contributing members of society. Both work to provide what the other members of their family need to both thrive and survive. This is Mother Nature at work, and is what’s been instilled in both species since the dawn of our existence. We may have been able to take the canine out of the wild, but there are parts of the wild that will always remain part of the canine—such as, the type of food they were physiologically built to take in, digest, utilize and absorb; the need for structure and order; the predatory behavior of rolling in carcasses or super-smelly things to mask their scent; and more.

Much like children, our dogs are a direct reflection of what we’re doing and not doing. When we invest our time, attention, energy and effort into shaping, guiding, directing, teaching and molding, it’s reflected in their behavior and disposition. This is why it’s important that what we’re imparting comes from a calm, patient, compassionate, confident, firm, yet loving, space.

Behavior Never Lies. At the root of all misbehavior is a need or set of needs not being met or fulfilled. The behavior, action or reaction, is an extension and byproduct of this. In the case of humans, this may be expressed by certain coping mechanisms or numbing techniques such as: excessive shopping or obsessive compulsive cleaning; bullying; eating disorders; alcohol or drug misuse;

smoking; too much TV; too many video games; too much time on Facebook or getting lost in cyber space; perfectionism; anxiety; depression, or other similar behaviors. Each resulting from an instinctual need not being met and fulfilled in a certain area of life (outside of medical or health issues). In the canine world, though the expression may differ (such as excessive digging, barking, jumping, whining, aggression, resource guarding, chewing), the source is very much the same.

Dogs Are Our Dependents. The choices and decisions we make directly affect their quality of life. The onus falls upon us to step up and become the Leader their DNA tells them they need. We are who they look to for their cues, guidance and direction, which is why investing in ourselves and working to move into a better, more empowered, grounded space is very important.

Everything we do with our dogs is a conversation. Our energy, how we’re feeling and our emotional state. Body language, movement, posture, how we’re carrying and handling ourselves. Tone of voice and vocal inflection. Intention. We say far more without using any words at all. Dogs are expert interpreters of body language and energy, reading even the most minute movements, subtleties and shifts. A tense arm or super tight grip on the leash during a walk. The increase of our heart rate and breathing pattern when we’re confronted with a situation we’re not feeling so confident in handling.

Imagine we have two people standing side by side. One is standing tall with squared shoulders and hips, head held high, owning their space. Eye contact is direct. When he or she speaks, the tone of voice is calm, low-pitched, affirmative, clear and served with an exclamation point or period at the end. The other person is uncomfortable in their space, shoulders rounded, back hunched over, the head is low, the eyes are shifty. The tone of voice is soft, unsure and high-pitched with a question mark at the end. Which of these two people would be more believable to you? Which would you feel more confident following? Both project a very different energy.

In my opinion, there’s no such thing as a bad dog; and a vast difference between behavior and trait. Behaviors are nurtured and conditioned, whereas traits are more ingrained and are genetically part of the individual. While they can be managed, they cannot be removed or undone. Like humans, very few dogs are born unbalanced or with intent to harm

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or kill; but they are born with their own personalities and drives—such as pack drive vs. prey drive vs. fight or flight drive. Their behaviors are conditioned by humans through our actions and inactions, knowingly or unknowingly—such as showing affection to the wrong state of mind, helicopter dog parenting, coddling, humanizing and babying our dogs; not meeting and fulfilling their instinctual needs; or keeping them in isolation—and are also influenced by their dominant drive and individual personalities.

It's up to us to ensure that our dogs feel safe, secure and comfortable being under our guidance, tutelage and care. Humans need to provide ways to help them reconnect to their natural, instinctual state of calm through meeting and then fulfilling their needs; teaching them how to practice polite, respectful behavior in any given scenario; and providing opportunities for them to simply be dogs.

When we invest in our own personal growth, we're indirectly investing in all who depend on and share space with us. The more empowered and fulfilled we are as human beings, the better leaders, providers, co-workers, managers, parents, friends, sons and daughters, siblings and dog parents we are.

This is how dogs help us to become fully present and accountable. This work bleeds out into every aspect of our lives, and is how dogs help us to become more intuitive and self-aware. Getting in touch with that part of ourselves we've neglected while chasing the American dream, and underneath who our fast-paced, success-and-material-driven, impatient, time-is-money culture has told us to be.

Balance isn't something that just happens. It's afforded, invested in, is a daily practice, and is part of the human experience. Dogs remind us of this.

When dogs know we can handle whatever may come our way, it takes the pressure and onus off of them. They can relax and enjoy life—as a dog. They find safety and security in the knowing that their human has got it together, and can and will handle whatever may come their way.

Self-awareness doesn't happen overnight, nor does the establishment of trust and respect. As with everything worthwhile, it's a practice and a process. Take each day as it comes. Breathe. Making the time to get to know ourselves on a deeper level, addressing the beliefs and operating systems behind our reactions and behavior. The more we work to bring ourselves into a healthy, more grounded space, the better our relationships with our dogs and others will be.

We are our dogs' life-long guidance counselors. Their role models. Way-showers. and when we show up consistently from a calm, grounded space, practicing a confident, firm yet loving state of mind and being, this is what we teach. Our daily practice, manner of approach and way of life becomes their daily lesson.

This isn't about being the perfect human, or cultivating the perfect dog; but it is everything about creating awareness, raising points to consider, and growth. After all, isn't that what life's all about? This is what dogs are here to remind us: We may not always get the dog we want or expected, but we always get the dog we need. 🐾

