

Tell Me Who's Watching

Written by Lisa Hartman
October 2010

Your dog is, constantly, and he's taking in more information than you know.



“Every breath you take, every move you make, I’ll be watching you.” While this line from a popular song written by Sting was about obsessive love, the lyrics could equally be applied to your dog. Did you know you are training your dog even when you are not *trying* to train him? Every move you make sends a message to your dog and unofficially trains him to behave a certain way.

Let’s take a look at some popular, passive training that goes on in the average pet home. Some of this may look familiar to readers of this column, but it may also make you acutely aware of all your actions.

Did you know your dog distinguishes your Monday-through-Friday work week from your weekends? This is one of my personal favorites, and it applies to every single dog owner who keeps the nine-to-five routine.

Certainly your dog doesn’t maintain a Blackberry calendar or really know days of the week. But on the weekends you linger in bed a little longer. Maybe the coffee pot doesn’t come on automatically. You don’t hop in the shower first thing, or head off to the gym in a rush. Most important, you don’t put on binding clothes with high-heeled shoes, shave, or use makeup.

You are lounging casually in Saturday morning sweat pants, and that can only mean one thing: dog park! Or some other sort of poochie time activity and togetherness that makes his tail wag

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with glee. Your sweat pants and relaxed demeanor also signify that your dog will not be left alone for hours on end. In fact the human behaviors described above (showering, shaving, putting on formal clothes) usually are the precursors to separation-anxiety symptoms for a dog; they paint the picture of impending aloneness.

Something similar happens when packing for a trip. If your dog sees you pack suitcases and then you leave, he will associate suitcases with you leaving him. I often hear an owner say, "Rocky was mad at me for leaving, and he peed in the house." Actually Rocky was probably just nervous from your absence, or the person watching him didn't keep his potty schedule.

The point is that small gestures can mean big things. Whether you brush your teeth first thing in the morning could alert your dog to what kind of day might lie ahead.

Many times I encounter people I refer to as "untraining owners," those who get in the way of their dog's training progress. One example: Pulling on leashes during walks.

I am called for help because dogs are ripping owners' arms out of their sockets as Rocky rushes to a tree to smell the delectable scents left by other dogs. The owners work on the program and follow the prescribed treatment for a while, but then real life sets in again. They slowly start wavering, slipping back into old patterns, letting their dogs drag them around while they are talking on the phone, letting Rocky pull them to a tree only a couple of feet away because they want him to finish his business quickly so they can return to the house, which also teaches the dog that walks end after you eliminate, so better hold it in longer!

The same holds true for dogs who are in the habit of jumping up on people. You don't want the dog to jump, so for months you practice "sit to greet" training. Then upon returning home from a long trip away from your best friend, he barrels toward you, leaps up on you -- and you pet him! The next morning you're still happy to see him (if he's not already sleeping in your bed), and now you pat your chest for him to jump up, pet him, then coo, "Okay, I know, come on down, come down...." All this in your lovey-dovey, doggie-talk voice.

What a confusing set of signals humans send! Your dog will probably continue jumping. It's fun, natural for dogs, and it gets him a load of attention to boot!

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Do you tell your dog to stay off the furniture when you are home, but you just know he is sprawled out on it when you're away? Same thing with your dog pawing through the kitchen wastebasket? He doesn't know it is wrong. What he has learned is that doing such things *in front of you* is dangerous. When you aren't there, these activities are safe and fair game! Do you follow through on what you ask of your dog? If you don't, he learns that your words have no meaning.

Ladies, do you get nervous when you walk with your dog past strange men or at night? Guess what -- your dog knows it. From your slightly altered breathing to your change of pace, tightening of the leash, or even a rise in your blood pressure, your dog can sense you are uncomfortable. Repeated often enough, this can teach your dog to be uncomfortable in those settings too, and to display some (undesirable) behavior of his own.

Even squinting your eyes to hone in on an object, your dog is on it and is watching you. Do you shoot him a look after being startled by a loud noise? Do you get agitated and jump up when the door bell rings? Your dog can sense it, and he may start barking more with every knock or ring of the bell.

More examples of unintended training: All those treats you give your dog for no particular reason? That teaches him he doesn't have to work to get a paycheck, and certainly doesn't have much need for you. Life is a candy store, so why listen to anyone? People give him what he wants when he wants it simply for being cute.

Do you praise him with an uninspired, monotone "good dog" voice for something likeable he did? Do you reprimand him for something he did wrong, but can barely hold back laughter because it was actually funny? In either case, he knows you don't really mean it.

Your dog is observing you every moment, learning from your behavior. From your smallest breath to pulling on sweat pants to tightening your grip on his leash, you are unofficially training him.

Remember, you are not alone. Your dog is there too, and he is watching you!

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