

Yes, Your Dog Lacks Horse Sense

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
April 2014

It's up to you to get into his zone



Lucky for me, *Biscayne Times* continues its long tradition of publishing a column about pets with the addition of my new “Pet Talk.” Dipping into personal experience as a professional dog trainer for 27 years, I hope to bring to these pages behavior insight, useful training advice, and interesting stories about all types of pets.

Preparing for this month’s issue, I considered a sea of column-name suggestions. Some were too gimmicky, some too scholarly, and some conjured up unpleasant images. Landing on “Pet Talk” and getting a feel for the place, I think it’s good to drop anchor here.

Talking about pets has always been easy for me. Even as a shy youngster, I could always manage to yak about my critters: goldfish, turtles, Betsy the Boxer, Jerri the Poodle, Robby the horse.

Childhood pets -- everybody’s had them or wished they had. I imagine mine will all be resurrected here at one point or another, slipping into storylines; perhaps they’ll make you think of yours. They’ve helped set the foundation for a lifelong love of animals and the never-ending learning curve. I admit: This old dog can be taught new tricks.

As in most families with pets, my mom was the get-it-done one. She got dogs housebroken,

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scrubbed the turtles' plastic paradises, and flushed our belly-up fish down the commode. I had my chores, too, but they were fun ones, like brushing coats, doling out treats, and taking walks. If there was ever a pet mess, Mom was the cleaner-upper by default. Looking back, I mostly remember the good stuff -- the warm and snuggly, stress-free pet moments.

Roles are reversed, though, when we start our own families. Now it's up to us to handle the tougher jobs. What dog owner hasn't come home to an unpleasant surprise at least once? But if that happens a lot, we probably need some help, and we need to start thinking like a dog.

Here's a thought going on in a typical dog's head:

The missus came home today. One step inside the door and she started yelling hysterically. She kept pointing at the garbage on the floor. I don't get it.

Hey, we're human, right? Who wouldn't flip out at the sight of a trail of soggy coffee grinds winding through the living room, dotting the carpeted staircase, and coming to a stop in the bedroom closet? While we're venting about slimy wads of cellophane and hamburger meat packaging in a million pieces, and unidentifiable goo left on the couch -- and God knows all the refuse that's now inside his stomach -- the dog has his ears down, has lowered his posture, and looks very guilty, except that he's only responding to the big voice that's bellowing forth.

He's not making the connection that the act of getting into the garbage bin is causing us to yell, because the destruction happened hours earlier while we were away at work. The bad behavior was him getting into the trash can, and we missed it.

Prevention works well to curb certain unwanted behaviors, and trash raiding is one of them. Cans with lids keep out most ravenous pets. Some people opt to put a small can under the kitchen sink with a childproof lock on the cabinet. I've even seen dog owners keep their kitchen trash in the garage. Similarly, the bathroom wastebasket is handily hidden from view in the shower stall or bathtub. "Out of sight, out of mind" is the mantra. If this works, then the problem is solved.

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There will always be a small percentage of dogs that try their hardest to dive into that garbage again, even with a secured lid. Extra measures can be taken when needed. A used soda can or two with several pennies inside can be placed on top of the lid and will make an immediate racket if a dog disturbs the booby trap. ScatMat manufactures a horseshoe-shaped product that fits around the base of a garbage can and gives a low-level zap when your pet gets too close and steps on it.

If zapping sounds too extreme, create a no-approach zone with large, crumpled sheets of heavy-duty aluminum foil. Secured to the floor with tape in an arc around the perimeter of the kitchen can, this moat of tin will discourage entry.

Remember what's going on in the dog's head while yelling at him long after the deed is done? He's confused, thinking, *I don't get it* -- because we didn't catch him in the act. Through training, through immediate correction, things are a whole lot clearer.

What should be going through his head is this: *Nosing through the garbage can means something unpleasant is going to happen RIGHT NOW.*

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