

Improving Your Relationship with Your Dog (Hierarchy Reversal)



"One secret of deepening any sort of relationship with our dogs is providing them with leadership they can trust." - The Monks of New Skete [Let Dogs Be Dogs](#)

You, as a dog owner, are the most critical component of a dog's hierarchy. You are the compassionate authority, the good parent, the benevolent pack leader, even if the pack consists of just you and your dog.

Once you understand how to be your dog's pack leader, the real relationship with your dog begins. As leader, your job is to decide when, where, and how resources of *food, space, and time* are given. If you do your job well, your dog will not only behave properly, he'll also be happy. If you take nothing else from your dog's training program, please know that controlling resources can be the foundation of a wonderful and intentional life with your dog.

Some people are afraid that assuming the role as pack leader is going to spoil their relationship with their dog: that their dog is going to resent being subordinate. Nothing could be further from the truth. Dogs are hardwired for this kind of relationship, and they thrive when given the opportunity to find their rightful place in the pack.

Some Ways to Control Resources

Food

Creating rules for how, when, and where your dogs receive their food is a great way to start establishing your role as the pack leader.

1. Scheduled feeding times

The first and easiest way to begin improving your relationship with your dog is by helping them know when they can expect to be fed. By having a feeding schedule and routine your dog knows when they will be having their next meal, and what is expected of them at meal time.

Having a scheduled feeding time doesn't necessarily mean you need to feed your dog at exactly the same time every day, but that is a simple way to develop a feeding schedule. The other way, which helps with people who may have varying work hours is to have a routine that signals that it is feeding time.

Example: Whenever I get home from work, whether it is 4pm or 7pm, I first let my dogs out of their kennels to go outside and go potty while I prepare their bowls. When they come inside, they are to go directly back to their kennels to get fed. They know that when I get home, that is when they get their dinner. The same routine is applied when I wake up for work in the morning. First they go out to potty, then they go to their kennels to be fed.

2. Kennel feeding

Kennel feeding adds some additional requirements of your dog before you give them their food. Some owners ask their dogs to sit before they get to eat their food, but having your dog go into the kennel achieves the same benefits as asking them to sit.

Helping your dog understand what is expected of them will help them learn that nothing in life is free. Asking your dog to go into their kennel and be calm is the way to earn their food is a simple way to help them understand what is expected of them!

The additional benefits kennel feeding has over merely having your dog sit before feeding include controlling more than just what your dog must do to be fed. By feeding in the



kennel, you control when they eat, where they eat, and you can require actions by the dog, prior to eating as well as when they are finished.

3. Earning their meals

Just like with kennel feeding, asking your dog to perform any action before they receive their food can clearly convey that they need to earn their food. You can require your dogs to enter their kennel and wait while you prepare their food before you feed them.

Other options that you can use to have your dogs earn their food is to ask them to sit and wait patiently before digging into their food bowl. The key is for you as the leader to be patient as well, and wait until your dog is calm before releasing them and letting them eat.

4. Prepare food first, but feed last

Asking your dogs to wait in their kennels while you prepare their food tells them that they are not allowed to be overly excited while you are preparing their dinners. Another form of this step would be to prepare your dog's dinner at the same time you prepare your dinner, but give their dinner after you have finished eating.

This step plays more on the deeper psychological impact of pack dynamics that stems from the evolution of dogs from wolves.

Space

As the pack leader, you decide what space you occupy and when. You can also repair or adjust your hierarchy with your dog by defining what space your dog can occupy and when. Don't be afraid to reduce or limit the space your dog has access to if your dog begins displaying concerning behaviors.

1. Tether

Tethering is the act of keeping your dog on a leash and requiring them to be on leash with you for extended periods throughout each day. Tethering tells your dog that they are required to be with you when you decide they need to be with you. It also identifies you as the pack leader because when you change your location, you require your dog to change their location as well. If you are staying still, your dog must stay where you are as well.

2. Boundary or "Place"-Stay Commands

Boundary-stays are commands used to teach a dog that they must remain within clear and defined boundaries. Boundary-stays can be performed on elevated beds, soft beds, specific pieces of furniture, or even on dedicated platforms. Anything that has clear boundaries that the dog can easily understand.

While you can work up to something as simple as a square of carpet, this can often be a bit confusing for a just starting to learn the command because it is very similar to the ground. Remember that if your dog is in a boundary stay that you should monitor your dog and hold them accountable if they decide to leave the boundary stay before they are released.

3. Limiting areas of the home

When your dog is allowed to have free rein over the home lets them feel like they are king of the castle. Limiting some areas of the house and creating spaces that your dog is not allowed to go identifies that this home belongs to you and you are sharing parts of that home with your dog.

4. No dogs allowed on the furniture

This step is crucial for dogs who may resource guard significant social locations in the home such as your favorite couch or your bed. Significant pieces of furniture can begin to be extremely valuable to your dog and they may try to control who can be on or near that furniture. Eliminating access to all furniture conveys to your dog that the furniture belongs to you, not the dog.

5. Control all doorways



Some of the simplest ways to control all doorways is to prevent your dog from passing through a doorway before you. With a particularly head strong dog this may seem like more of a challenge than you would expect, but there are some simple techniques you can use.

If your dog knows how to heel, you can have them heel with you through the door. Heel means walking next to you and not ahead of you. Another great exercise is using a sit command before walking through the door. If your dog can do a sit-stay, you should place your dog in a sit-stay before passing through the doorway, and once you've gone through the door, you can then release your dog or call them to you. When practicing this exercise, you should also do several repetitions where you don't call your dog but return to them where they are sitting.

Time

Our dogs feel most comfortable when they have a regular routine and schedule where their food and activities are predictable and reliable. This is particularly helpful for dogs who may have issues with anxiety or fear. If your dog knows that they will be fed at specific times throughout the day, it will reduce their desire to beg for food outside of feeding times, and they will appreciate the food at their scheduled meal times more.

1. Scheduled training times

We already talked a little about how to use scheduled feeding in combination with kennel feeding. Creating a feeding schedule can really help your dog understand that you are in control of the food, but also allows them to know that they will get fed on a predictably schedule.

If your dog understands what to expect in combination with what is expected of them, they will begin to thrive without any sense of uncertainty about when and where they will get their next meal. It also creates a stronger bond of trust between you and your dog.

2. Scheduled play times

Just like scheduled feeding, having a predictable schedule and routine allows your dog to just enjoy the moment because they don't need to worry about when they will get their next chance to enjoy some play.

Between play sessions, toys should be put away. Some think that this is unfair, but in fact, this actually allows your dog to enjoy their toys more when the toys are brought out for play time.

3. Scheduled rest time

If you are regularly training, playing, or working with your dog, its important to remember that our dogs need rest as well. Giving your dog some alone time in their kennel or a space where they feel safe can allow them to recharge. Some of our dogs love to work so much that they may forget to rest, even when you give them the opportunity to. So, putting them in their kennel and latching the door really encourages them to relax.

Pet, Praise, and Play

Pet, praise, and play should be in regular supply to your dog, but our dogs often use inappropriate behaviors to achieve pet, praise, or play. Dogs can often beg for affection by making noises, whining, barking, or growling, or they may use physical contact to tell their owner that they want attention. Giving attention for these behaviors will encourage these behaviors and may encourage these behaviors to escalate to undesirable behaviors such as pawing or scratching for attention or to get what they want.

1. Petting and praise must be earned



Petting your dog is a great way to build a strong bond with your dog, but remember to pet when your dog is offering appropriate behaviors. Appropriate behaviors can include something as simple as being quiet and calm. Other examples are if your dog approaches you and offers a sit, or a down.

Be ware not to reward your dog if they are being pushy or inappropriate. Some things that our dogs do that can seem cute are actually rather inappropriate. These could include your dog jumping on you, putting their paws on you, pawing at you, whining, barking, or anything where they are actively trying to get your attention.

2. Toys are put away when not in use

Putting away your dog's toys between each use teaches your dog a plethora of valuable lessons! The first and most important is that it will teach your dog to love their toys so much more when they don't have 24/7 access to them. This also teaches them that you are in control of their toys. If the toys only come out when you plan to actively play with your dog, your dog will begin to associate more positive experiences with you and with the toys.

Take out the toys for training or dedicated play time. You start the play session and you decide when it is over. We recommend the play session while your dog is still really having fun, and not waiting until they are bored or tired of the game. The leaves them with the feeling of wanting more! You can also use toys as rewards during training sessions! Make sure each time you reward with the toy you have a mini play session (don't just hand them the toy and then take it right back).

Increase Physical Exercise and Mental Stimulation

Dogs need three fundamentals to live content and fulfilling lives: Physical exercise, mental stimulation, and communication with their owners. All of these rules along with training are ways that communicate our expectations of our dogs to on a regular basis. Physical exercise helps keep our dogs healthy and helps to prevent boredom. Mental stimulation is what really gives our dogs a sense of purpose in their lives.

1. Increase exercise

Exercise is an extremely important part of your dog's overall health and can improve how much your dog is motivated to do anything with you. Regularly exercising with your dog will also create more reward history with your dog being active with you. Your dog doesn't know the difference between a game of fetch, a playing tug in the living room, or a formal training session. All of these activities just mean that your dog gets to do fun stuff with you. We as dog owners assign the purpose of each activity for our dogs.

Improving your dog's overall health through proper exercise can also have a dramatic effect on their temperament and demeanor. Often changes in your dog's behavior can be attributed to physical ailments that they don't have the ability to communicate to us. If you dog suddenly doesn't tolerate being pet or touched in certain areas, its important to consider the possibility of illness or injury.

Exercise also increase the production of serotonin and dopamine in your dog's brain which help your dog being happier and more well balanced. These are also important to help your dog receive and understand new information during training!

2. Obedience Training

Good training should be enjoyable for our dog and yourself as the trainer. Obedience training has benefits far beyond teaching our dogs how to do what they are told. Regular training sessions teach our dogs that we are the pack leader and that following our lead produces positive rewards. Training also stimulates your dog's mental processes including problem solving and critical thinking skills! The best dog training teaches your dog to consistently make good decisions and ultimately will develop your dog's overall quality of character.



3. Puzzle Feeder Toys

It can be difficult to find abundant times throughout the day to create new ways to get your dog thinking and exhausting their energy. Mental stimulation can tire out your dog faster than most physical exercise. You can keep your dog busy or make meal time a game by filling a puzzle toy with their kibble. Puzzle toys are also helpful if you have a pup who has a tendency to eat too fast.

4. Interactive toys

Similar to puzzle feeder toys, interactive toys require your dog to use problem solving to figure out how to play with it. These may include toys that have smaller toys hidden inside of them, or toys with compartments that need to be opened.

You can also create your own interactive playtime experiences by hiding your dog's favorite toy and asking them to find it. Whatever toys you choose for your dog, involving yourself in the playing process can help improve your bond!

Implementing These Tools

The list of rules provided is not a complete list of rules, but it's a great program to get started with deepening your relationship with your dog. You don't need to implement every single rule listed above, and you may even come up with some new rules that aren't listed here.

The key to using these methods are using them consistently for an extended period of time. We've had dogs that responded well to using these rules for several weeks, while others needed to use these rules for a matter of months. The importance is that once you decide to start using any of these rules, that the rule is used and enforced at all times and by all members of the household. So, if you decide you want to use the "No dogs on the furniture" rule, it is important that all members of the household enforce the rule.

How Will I Know When I Don't Need to Use Them Any More?

The fact that you are using this guide indicates that your dog may have been presenting some behaviors that may have been concerning to you. Or you simply wanted to have a deeper relationship with your dog, and maybe are looking for ways to improve your dog's overall well-being.

If you choose to only implement one or two of the suggested rules from this list, you may not see noticeable changes. However, if you are using this guide because of a specific unwanted behavior, and you chose one or two of the recommendations directly associated to that unwanted behavior, you could see dramatic changes in that particular area.

If you have been consistently using a number of these rules throughout your every day life with your dog, your dog may begin responding to commands more consistently. Your dog may be calmer throughout the day, wait more patiently at meal time. Your dog will also likely be less reactive to dogs or people if that was a problem you were having previously.

Whatever behaviors you wanted to address through this program will likely improve simply by defining your role as the pack leader, and helping your dog feel more comfortable in their role as a pack member.

Many of these rules can continue to be implemented, such as those pertaining to meal times, kennel feeding, scheduled training, play, and rest. These are generally great recommendations for all dog owners to use with their dogs indefinitely. If you decide that after not allowing your dog on the furniture for the purpose of this program, that now you want to cuddle with your dog on the couch, you can alter the rule to dogs are only allowed on the furniture when invited.

Whatever the case is, if you choose to stop using any of the rules because you have seen sufficient improvement with your dog, you may consider reinstating the rule if your dog begins demonstrating the unwanted behaviors again.

Dogs and Drastic Changes

Your dog may have been a member of your family for a long time already and may have had relative freedom to do whatever they please up to this point. When you decide to begin implementing some of these restrictions on their everyday lives, you may expect some resistance or defiant behavior on your dog's part. Any drastic change in your dog's world can result in behavioral changes at first. The importance with these rules is to remain consistent and steadfast.

The recommendations listed in this guide are not unfair or inhumane, and are no more than what you would expect of a child. It is not unreasonable to dictate when and where it is appropriate for your dog to eat, or when and where it is appropriate to play, learn, and rest. Teaching your dog to trust your guidance will actually teach them to be more adaptive to drastic changes in the future, such as when your family moves, when your family structure changes, like having a baby, or when one of your children moves out, or if a significant other moves in.

Warning

If at anytime when you first implement a new rule, you suddenly see a severe and adverse behavior change in your dog, stop with that specific rule and consult with your trainer.

Sometimes, dogs may have underlying psychological conditions, physical injuries or illness, or training requirements that don't present themselves until they encounter certain forms or stress, changes in their environment, or as a result of frustration.

Concerning symptoms may include but are not limited to: Self harm, self mutilation, loss of appetite or refusal to eat more than two days, refusal to drink water for more than 24 hours, excessive vomiting (more than 4-5 times per day), or any neurological symptoms such as loss of balance, loss of coordination, seizures, or sensory perception impairment.

While these types of reactions are extremely rare, they should always be taken very seriously. Implementing changes to your dog's routine can sometimes be stressful, and each dog will handle stress differently. If you notice any severely concerning physical or neurological responses to training, consult your vet and trainer as soon as possible.