

So Why Train Your Dog?

Written in collaboration with members of the International Association of Canine Professionals (IACP), www.canineprofessionals.com, and with reference to the Volhard classic, *Dog Training for Dummies* by Jack and Wendy Volhard.

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You had a dog when you were a kid and you never “trained” him and he was great. So why all this training stuff??? Why can’t we just live with Fritz. He’ll figure it out....right?? Spot always did.

Yes, there are still dogs like that, and families with tons of time to spend with their dog – but the complexity of modern life, makes that increasingly rare. Back “then”, in that mythical world where dogs trained themselves, many families had a stay at home Mom, who actually did things with the dog while everyone was gone. Plus, it is highly likely that Spot went everywhere with the kids, all over the neighborhood, with other kids and other dogs. So in reality, “training” went on for hours every day. Expectations were laid down and dogs were expected to follow them – the very foundation of training. It’s just that we didn’t call it training, we called it life. Dogs were “trained” in the cauldron of neighborhood life. Dogs that didn’t cope with that were gotten rid of.

But in today’s world of leash laws, diminished open space, and planned activities for children – not free neighborhood time, dogs don’t interact with the world at large, buffering their behaviors in the process. Dogs live much more isolated lives in the cauldron of energy of a particular individual household. They still need the same level of skills and behaviors, but now the only person who is going to teach that to Fritz is you.

So why train your dog??

1. All living creatures crave stability.

No living creature functions well in chaos. Chaos not only affects the organism mentally, and behaviorally, but physically as well. Dogs in chaos, just like us, are more likely to have a compromised immune system, get ill, stay ill longer, and have a shorter life span. Without training, dogs are far more likely to be prone to extremes of behavior.

The entire system of dog culture and dog language is set up to facilitate conflict resolution. Dog culture, true dog culture, is one of the most extraordinary examples of a society focused on conflict resolution on the planet. The entire focus of their social language is to facilitate a steady state. So dogs are hard wired to crave stability. See Turid Rugaas’ work on *Calming Signals*.

Nor do we do well with a house in chaos from an ill mannered dog. It’s upsetting and

draining on the whole household, whether that's just you or a larger family. In today's world, there are enough stressors in daily life without adding to it by having an ill mannered dog making every moment of the day a crises.

2. All living creatures crave clarity.

Which boss would you rather work for, the boss who made you guess what they wanted then hollered at the result, or the boss who laid out clear expectations of what they wanted from your work product, and was then able to say yay or nay with respect to how close you came to executing?? The same is true of our dogs.

There is not a single animal I have trained over the last 30 years who hasn't at some point in the process gone, "Oh so that's what you wanted. Why didn't you say so.....!!" Training enables a clear line of communication. Dogs aren't born knowing sit. Dogs aren't born knowing that you need them to wait at the door quietly until they are released to the yard. Those are some of the thousands of pieces of communication we need for our dogs every day.

3. Training is a safety net.

Let's go, Come, Wait, Sit and Down are not just parlor tricks, they are life savers. A dog who waits at the door is a dog who doesn't bolt out the house into traffic. In Arizona, land of things that can stick you, sting you, or stab you, responsiveness to commands can prevent major injuries. A dog that has a recall is a dog who can be kept from harm.

4. Training creates intimacy.

Who wants to spend time with a dog who is leaping, whining, chewing, constantly destructive, peeing, mouthing, or just won't settle. Yuck. Slowly but surely, dogs like that get sidelined -- outside, or in their crate, or in a room -- but in some way or another away from us. It's just natural. Again, it's that chaos thing. Nobody wants to spend time with things that make us more unsettled than we already are just getting through a day. Dogs like this are energy vampires, just like some of the people in our lives. Gradually we pull away, whether we are even aware of it or not. We like to spend time with dogs who we can get along with....but that requires communication, and communication requires training.

5. Training leads to inclusion.

A trained dog is included in family activities. The more training the dog has, the more the dog is included. That's just a fact. Trained dogs go with us. Untrained dogs stay home. Again, we are building intimacy. Is there anything better than a good traveling buddy?? Or anything worse than traveling someone with whom you are out of sync? Here's the great part about a trained dog. Because they are subject to going at your rhythm, they by definition become the perfect traveling companion. They rest while you drive, go for walks when you stop, hang out when you want to hang out, and chill when you want to chill. It's the best, the absolute best. The more things we do with our dogs, the more they become part of the whole family gestalt. It's hard to include a dog who is pacing continuously in the car, barking at passersby, pulling you over when you try to walk him, or chewing up a hotel room.

Intimacy and inclusion lead to a healthier dog. Isolated dogs are unhappy dogs. All isolated living creatures do less well than creatures included in a social unit. A trained dog is a companion for life.

6. A trained dog travels well and is more adaptable to change.

We have said that a trained dog is included in family activities. But a trained dog can also travel with its family and be welcomed whether travel includes a campground, a trailer park, cabin at the lake, relative's apartment, or a nice hotel. Additionally, there is something that happens to the bond between owner(s) and dog when you travel with a dog. It is as if the depth of commitment of the dog to your pack deepens. A traveling pack creates a different sense of identity in the dog's mind.

Plus, the more exposure your dog has to behaving (under command) in different circumstances, the more adaptable and confident your dog will be, and the more solid their commands will be. A dog does not just automatically generalize. Just because they sat at puppy class, doesn't mean they will sit at the soccer game. Typically it takes repetition in 3 - 5 different locations for dogs to translate the information from one part of their brain to another. So, the more places you take your dog to and ask him to sit and down, the more deeply ingrained that command will become in stored memory. So traveling and training literally builds a more confident trained dog. Who knew??

Circumstances change all the time in households. Routines change, people come and go to school, to work. Change is the rule anymore. The more adaptable your dog is, the more they can take household change in stride without stressing. Moreover, it is the rare household that will live the entire life of a dog in the same house. Training builds adaptability to change. All your dog needs to know is that the same language of: come, sit, down that you used at House A comes along to House B. Continuity means life is good.

7. Training is essential for a dog's well being.

You can't brush a dog who won't stand still. You can't check the feet of a dog who nips when you try to handle their feet. You can't get a thorn out, or check for cuts. You can't maintain the nails correctly and thus prevent gait abnormalities that can lead to early arthritis. You certainly can't check a belly or groin for signs of cancer. You can't check teeth for cracks, or gums, ears or eyes for signs of infection. Training a dog to tolerate routine physical examination and care is essential to your dog's well being. Many a physical ailment has been nipped in the bud due to timely owner handling. Aging dogs get all sorts of funny lumps and bumps. If you have handled that dog since a pup you notice changes and can provide your vet with quality information.

And as we have repeatedly said, a trained, stable dog is included in the family unit, and inclusion makes for well being. A trained dog thrives with mental and physical stimulation and glows with good health.

8. A trained dog is good for our health.

A good relationship with a dog also has numerous health benefits for the human partner: longer life, lowered blood pressure, increased immune strength, and lower stress to name a few. That's why dogs are used in therapeutic relationships in medical establishments. It's not just because dogs are "pleasant" for the patients – it's because interaction with the dogs actually has substantial medical benefits. The same is true of us in our homes. Whereas the opposite is true of living with an out of control hooligan dog where stress can go through the roof.

Under more extreme circumstances, dogs can actually be lifesavers. We all can have rough patches in our lives. Having the necessity of being responsible for the well being of another creature can keep us from slipping off the face of the world. Marriages come and go. Health comes and goes. Jobs come and go. Friendships come and go. The daily routine of a trained dog keeps us anchored to the rhythms of the day. A trained dog is far better than any pill invented.

9. Training your dog deepens the relationship to unimagined levels.

While I have always had dogs, the more I have learned about training and building a working relationship with my dogs, the more profound the communication between myself and my dogs has become. Just like our human relationships, the better we get at communicating our needs and wants, the richer our relationships become. There is nothing like a friendship where the dialogue is built on a rich fabric of shared experiences and communication. I'll never forget the evening hike on the W. Fork of the Black River in the White Mts. of Arizona when Nagi, my shepherd, and I stumbled on a huge herd of elk coming down to evening water. "Wait" I commanded quietly as I walked up to him to clip on his leash. Quietly he stood at my side as we watched in mesmerized wonder the cows and calves and bulls communicating in calls and whistles, in an elaborate orchestrated group event. As the big bull hiding in the trees bugled the retreat, we watched an entire herd vanish into the forest. Nagi and I looked at each other in amazed delight. Ok, yeah, he would have happily chased the elk to the next county, but he didn't, he knew better, because he was trained to a beautiful recall even in the midst of a herd of elk. So instead we were able to have a moment, a treasure, just between the two of us. My dogs and I have shared a thousand thousand of these moments over the years, filling my heart with the daily poem of nature's beauty.

10. Having a trained dog is just plain fun.

Aw come on. Didn't you ever want to just show off Fritz to that neighbor always bragging about how cool their Fifi is. We're only human. But leaving ego aside, having a trained dog, and doing things with a trained dog, is just plain old fashioned fun. You meet some great people along the way, and find connections in your community you might never have found, but for the dogs. There's way, way not enough fun in the world. Increase the world's fun quotient. Train your dog. Training feeds the soul: yours and your dogs.