

Dog Training Articles By Beth Bradley

Setting Boundaries and Being the Pack Leader

Too often, people equate setting boundaries and being the pack leader with compulsion or being tough on their dogs. I see it more often with rescue dogs and their owners. Owners who rescue their dogs obsess about what a sad life their dog had and what must have happened to in the past. In turn, they allow the dog to get away with anything without any correction or minimal correction. These owners are “protecting” their dogs from the past. The problem is that they are transmitting fear and weakness. No dog wants to follow a weak leader; therefore, these dogs (a) begin to feel comfortable in their new environment and (b) begin to take over the role as pack leader thereby showing behavioral problems that did not rear their head before.

Your rescue may remember what someone did to them in the past; they usually do not equate the same with new humans entering their life. The ‘fear’ that the human believes their dog is projecting is actually submission. Our love for our dogs should not equate to not setting boundaries of correct and wrong behavior. When watching any Mother with puppies, you can see the Mother acting in a calm and assertive manner. She sets the rules in which the puppies must live by, controls the movement of the group, protects and nurtures the group and lastly, shows affection. The Mother does not spend hours cooing and kissing her pups, instead she watches the surroundings and the pups to be sure that they are safe and interacting within the boundaries she has set. She is calm in her demeanor and not running the fence and barking and growling at everything in her sight because that behavior shows weakness.

The Pack leader is never obnoxious or loud or reactive, this behavior shows weakness. A Pack leader stands tall, is not overly dominant and is not reactive but assesses situations. I enjoy watching dogs interact because I can see the dynamics of dog behavior. When I have a group of dogs playing and interacting, my male dog usually sits or stands tall in the group and just watches. He doesn’t play, doesn’t growl, he allows others to approach him and ‘pay homage’ but his eyes are everywhere. The only time he relaxes is when I enter the group, then I can see his whole body language change and he allows me to ‘take charge’. He will then go about his business and even play with the others. It is amazing to watch the dogs approach him after I enter the yard. They know he is ‘off duty’ and play willingly rather than approach him in a submissive manner. But when a new male enters the group, his first stop is to approach my male to see if he can take over as Pack leader. That test is usually over before it begins and without a fight, because of my male’s aura and the way he carries himself, calmly but with confidence. My male knows he doesn’t have to prove himself by growling or fighting, and no one has tested him yet.

Dogs do not want to be pack leaders because when they do they are corrected for such. When they growl at the neighbor or run the fence barking, they are punished. But, in

another instant they are treated like the pack leader by the constant caressing and the lack of limitations in other areas of their life. I am not advocating harsh corrections or 'beating' your dog; all I am saying is that you need to set rules of behavior and step in and correct your dog for breaking these rules. When enforcing the rules, you must make sure that you are (a) calm in your manner of verbal correction and physical correction and (b) that you get your point across. I received an email from someone with an aggressive dog that did not want to use any type of physical correction for the behavior. They wanted to use all positive reinforcement like treats. From the email I already ascertained that this person was not portraying himself as the pack leader and has reinforced this behavior in his dog by attempting to calm his dog down by using affection or treats, i.e. rewarding the behavior.

Setting boundaries (and the distance you have to go to set boundaries) is different for each dog because each dog's personality is different. When it comes to using training collars, I do not profess to be an advocate of any particular collar (though I may use one more than another). I believe that each dog is an individual. The equipment I use may be different from one dog to another based on my assessment of that dog. Most importantly, the correction must immediately stop the behavior. The Pack leader's correction is quick and doesn't last long. If you must repeatedly correct your dog, you have not earned his respect.

Setting boundaries means two things (a) making sure your dog realizes that his obedience to a command is mandatory and (b) that he is not allowed to make decisions on his own. You are Pack Leader and he must wait for your command to proceed in a certain way. Make sure that you are consistent with the way you command and handle your dog. Dogs are much happier when there are no grey areas in their life and their handling. Make sure your dog understands that 'heel' is 'heel' and 'down' is 'down' and misbehavior to any command is going to get the same correction and reaction from you no matter what the situation and circumstance.

In addition to setting boundaries, it is of the utmost importance to make sure that you are giving your dog an outlet for his boundless energy. Make sure you are meeting his needs for exercise and play. I caution you, do not equate play time with a lack of boundaries. Even though it is your dog's 'time off' he still must follow rules of respect to other dogs and people. This means, no jumping or biting. Playtime is not a free for all; like all of our great American games, there are rules to be followed and your dog must abide by the rules in order to play.

Remember: love does not equal allowing your dog to get away with misbehavior. As Pack leader you need to set boundaries, protect the pack in an assertive way, enforce the rules of the pack, feed, water and make sure the pack receives the physical stimulation in the form of exercise that it needs and lastly, show affection. Our dog's love for us is unconditional but their respect has to be earned.

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Beth Bradley began studying animal behavior and dog training at 12 years of age. She became a New Jersey State Animal Control Officer in 1986. Beth graduated Rutgers University with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice. Throughout her schooling, Beth worked and studied under many well-renowned animal behaviorists and trainers. Beth formed her own company in 1989 and has made dog training her full time career since 1995. Beth is also a writer for the *Animal Companion*, she has produced CD-Roms and DVD's on training and is author of a training book titled *Real World Dog Training*.

Beth is a member of the German Shepherd Dog Club of America, the German Shepherd Dog Club of America – Working Dog Association, the United Schutzhund Clubs of America, and she is Secretary and Training Director of the Greater Philadelphia Schutzhund Club. Beth actively competes in both American Kennel Club and Schutzhund Trials both in the United States of America and Europe. Beth is a certified Canine Good Citizen Evaluator for the American Kennel Club.