



GUIDELINES FOR TEACHING SELF CONTROL

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Teaching your dog self control as the foundation for all other learning.

By Suzanne Clothier

Does your dog pull on lead when someone approaches? when he sees another dog? if joggers run by? if children are playing? if a cat or squirrel dash through the yard? Is he hard to control at the vet's or groomer's? when people come into your house?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, chances are your dog needs to learn self control. Just as children must learn to control their impulses before they can mature into responsible adults, dogs must learn self control before they can become well mannered canine citizens. Self control must be taught, just as you teach him to sit or speak or come when called.

Every owner can teach his dog self control by following these guidelines:

Train, don't restrain. Taking a firm grip on the leash and collar teaches the dog nothing except that you can restrain him. Instead, give a simple command, such as sit, reminding with the lead if needed, then loosen the lead so there is no tension at all. If the dog breaks position, quietly and slowly reposition him, and loosen the lead again.

Ask for compliance, not submission. View working with your dog as you would working with any friend. Avoid creating a struggle by asking the dog for more than he can do at the time. For example, if your dog is really excited, he may be unable or unwilling to lay down, but agreeable to sitting quietly with a few reminders from you. Compromise and be reasonable - most struggles between dog and owner are created when the owner attempts to dominate the dog, instead of finding a solution acceptable to both owner and dog.

Remember the dog does not know what his options are. A dog who is lacking self control simply does not know that it is possible to sit quietly in the face of distractions. It is the owner's responsibility to show the dog that he has options other than lunging, pulling or leaping around.

Move slowly and talk quietly. A dog who is highly excited needs calm, slow handling. A common mistake owners make is to move quickly, grabbing at the leash and collar, raising their voice and speaking in short, sharp tones. From the dog's point of view, the owner appears as excited as they are, and short sharp tones often sound like barking. Instead of calming the dog, this reinforces his excitement. By moving slowly and talking quietly, the owner sends a clear message to the dog that he is not excited and is in control of the situation.

Remind and ask, don't demand. A dog who is already excited is likely to resist a harsh correction or respond by becoming more excited. "Ask" by using the lightest possible touch on the leash and collar, and remind the dog what he's doing each time he forgets and shifts position.

Work on teaching self control in all situations. Begin by working in distraction free areas, and ask your dog to sit on a loose leash for five minutes. Gradually move on to more exciting situations, and practice often. Work at home, at friends' homes, in parks, shopping centers, at dog shows, training classes and the veterinarian's. As your dog's self control and respect for you increases, you can add laying down quietly for up to 30 minutes to his skills.

For more information, we recommend the Flying Dog Press booklet [Understanding & Teaching Self Control](#).

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SUZANNE CLOTHIER
PO BOX 105, ST JOHNSVILLE,
NY 13452
TEL: 518 568 3325
SUZANNECLOTHIER.COM