

Realistic Expectations

I've got a secret to tell you...

Dogs jump on people. They steal food, chew furniture, pull on leash, bark, knock over children, chase cats, get in the garbage, run off, break things, pee on the floor, growl, eat plants, eat computer wires, eat sheet rock...

There! I've said it! The secret is out! I'm teasing of course. Everyone knows that dogs do these things...Don't they? Then why are dogs routinely given away, surrendered to shelters or returned to shelters after adoption for one or more of these reasons? Why do pet owners get so exasperated when their dogs display one of these "behavior problems"? Part of the issue lies in the fact that even though we all know that dogs do these things...we don't expect OUR dog to do them! ☺ The larger issue is that today's dog owners are generally very short on time. We live in a "fast" society and we are used to instant gratification. Today's dogs spend more and more time alone. They get less and less exercise. When our dogs display undesirable behavior we want it fixed fast. We often don't have the time or patience to address the problem in an effective way. What's a poor dog to do? Alone all day? Lonely? Under exercised? Untrained? Hmmmmmm...that couch looks mighty tasty!

In response society has come up with toys that "keep Fido busy while you're at work". We utilize doggie daycare facilities where you can drop Fido off for socialization and exercise. And dog crates have become the norm in most homes. Although all three of these strategies have merit, they are not solutions. They should not and cannot be substitutes for exercise, training and socialization in the real world with a real owner! I cringe at the thought of how many dogs are locked up in crates 10 hrs a day! Dogs are spending so much time in day care that they are bonding with dogs and not so much with their owners. A food stuffed Kong toy should NOT take the place a game of fetch with your dog!

So does this mean that if you work full time you can't own a dog? Maybe. If you work long hours and have social commitments that also take you away from home it is simply not fair to own a dog. Neither you nor the dog will be happy with the relationship. But most of us can work and own a dog successfully if we follow some basic guidelines.

1. Choosing the right dog is crucial. If your idea of relaxing after work is kicking your shoes off, pouring a glass of wine and watching TV, then a high energy sporting dog is a BAD choice for you. I know they're always resting quietly on dog beds in the L.L Bean catalog...but not in real life! Try a smaller dog, bred to be a companion. A Peke, a Chihuahua, a Maltese (no terriers, please. They're – small, but FULL of energy!). If jogging, hiking and getting outside is your way of unwinding, then great! Get a Lab, a Golden, a Terrier! If you have a busy household with kids and people coming and going, choose a dog that is easy going, not super protective. When looking at mixed breed dogs choose one with the personality and energy level that is suitable for you. Ignore "guesses" at breed mix and go on the behavior you see.

2. Train your dog. Make the time to take a minimum of one session of classes with a qualified trainer or hire a private trainer. Read training and behavior books so you can understand the most effective ways to train your dog. Learn how to manage your environment to minimize or eliminate problem behavior. The three strategies listed above: "busy" toys, Doggie Daycare and crates are good tools – not a way of life!

3. If you can possibly fence your yard, do so! It will make your life so much easier when you're tired or pressed for time to exercise Fido. Seek out friends, co-workers or family members with dogs and set up regular "play dates". Dog play is a great way to tire out a young, social dog.

4. Do not expect a young dog to act like an old dog. If you want a mellow companion, content with a walk around the block and snuggle time on the couch...adopt a senior dog. It is VERY rewarding – trust me! If you want a puppy be prepared to train and supervise heavily for the first two years. Exercise needs don't generally start to drop off substantially until the dog is 3-5 yrs of age.

5. BE REALISTIC. "My 6 mth old puppy chewed my leather couch!" What in heaven's name was a 6 mth old pup doing unsupervised around a leather couch?! Do you realize that rawhide bones and leather couches are made out of the same thing? "My Shepherd puppy is crazy when I get home from work!" Really? An intensely intelligent dog, designed to bond strongly with his people and work close by their side...left sitting home alone all day in a crate? Of course he's beside himself by 6:00! Dogs are not stuffed animals. They have needs and individual personalities. Embrace that fact and work with your dog to build a relationship you can both enjoy.

Know them. Love them.

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