

Ask A Vet: Doggie Rewards Work Wonders

Sunday, January 4, 2015

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

We adopted a dog for our daughter for Christmas but we are having some issues with housetraining. The dog is older, about 2 years, and she still has accidents in the house and chews on things when we're away. My neighbor said we haven't established dominance over the dog and so she's acting out. How can we fix this?

-Need Help in Nappanee

Dear Need Help,

First of all, thank you for adopting and not shopping this Christmas! So many great pets are just waiting for someone to take them in and I am sure your new dog can turn out to be a great addition to your home. While your neighbor might have some good dog training tips, establishing dominance is very rarely a concern as the overwhelming majority of dog behavior issues are not at all dominance related. Because she is older, your dog already has the ability to control her "accidents" in the house, she just needs to know that "going" in the house is inappropriate. She also needs to know what is and what is not acceptable to chew on. While dogs are certainly very intelligent and intuitive, they can not be expected to understand house living if this is a new situation for them or if it was never taught properly in their previous situation. Many people will say their dog has a "guilty" or "ashamed" look which causes people to believe their dog knew what it did was wrong. Unfortunately, the facial expressions and body postures of dogs showing "guilt" or "shame" are typically dogs showing fear and/or submission in response to the person's tone and postures. A recent study showed that dogs would react with what their owners interpreted as guilt regardless of whether or not they had done the perceived crime. This is important to remember when training a dog as simply punishing it for doing wrong will not encourage the dog to do right. For example, punishing a dog when you come home and find an "accident" on the floor teaches the dog that you will be angry at her when there's a mess on the floor but doesn't teach her to go potty outside. While correcting a dog that potties inside is not inherently wrong, more can be accomplished by patiently waiting with the dog outside and immediately rewarding them for going there.

The same goes for chewing things. While you can correct the dog if you see her chewing something she shouldn't, you should also encourage the dog to chew on appropriate toys. If the dog is especially destructive while no one is home, the possibility of separation anxiety should also be addressed. Many dogs suffer from various anxiety disorders and this is one of the most common forms. These dogs will become very sensitive to the slightest cues that people are leaving and these cues will begin to contribute to a buildup of anxiety before they are even gone. Fortunately, these dogs can often be desensitized to these cues if they are frequently conducted when not associated with leaving. Try to frequently perform those actions you typically perform around the house immediately before leaving without actually going away. These can be things like picking up your keys and walking towards the door or turning off certain lights.

For issues of house training and/or destructive chewing, a dog crate can be very beneficial. Dogs generally feel very safe and secure in a crate but it should be large enough for your dog to comfortably stand up and turn around in. This can be a safe cozy place where the dog is unable to chew and will be unlikely to have accidents as well. Always be firm and consistent when trying to train a dog but be patient and positive as well. Talk to your veterinarian about any issues and familiarize yourself with some basic dog body language to help you understand what your dog is really feeling about a situation before assuming an issue is dominance related. In cases where anxiety is a problem, addressing the issue as if it is a dominance problem can contribute to worsening anxiety. If needed, your veterinarian can recommend a trainer or refer you to a board certified animal behaviorist if needed. Even seemingly severe issues can often be resolved with appropriate behavior modification.

Good luck with your new pet!

-Dr. Kathryn Ernst