

Bonding versus Training....is something out of order?

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After twenty-five years of training dogs, suddenly one day I realized that the way I trained dogs in my childhood, over 35 years ago, had great value—perhaps as much value as all of the things I had learned from renowned behaviorists and top trainers throughout the years. I realized that, as a child, before I taught my dog any tricks or took her to obedience school (I took my German Shepherd to obedience classes when I was in the sixth grade), I developed a close, loving bond with her.

We spent the first few weeks “hanging out” together—we played; I gave her treats, I talked “babytalk” to her. I was convincing her of my value as a friend. I was teaching her to trust me, although I never realized it in terms of formal dog training at the time. Princess followed my every move. She was thrilled to see me when I got home from school. I taught her to sit, down and do tricks, like shake hands and all the tricks that children love to for their dogs to do. Princess heeled off-leash—I didn’t know then that this was a difficult and advanced obedience exercise. She just wanted to be with me, right at my side.

As a teenager I spent many hours outdoors with Princess, walking up the side of the small mountain where we lived, running in the neighbor’s fields, picking dandelions, catching critters in the creek. I would sit on the front porch and tell her all my troubles. When the weather was bad, I would often camp out in the garage with a pillow and a book—just so I could be with my dog.

I grew up, and before long, I had enough money to show dogs, and attend the latest seminars on breeding, grooming and training. I began showing dogs professionally on weekends. I worked hard and eventually I began a successful owner/manager of a large boarding, grooming and dog training facility.

There is a crucial link between successful dog training and the relationship or depth of the bond an owner has with his dog. In fact, this bond, however strong, serves as the foundation for the training program. This link is something that is often overlooked or forgotten, even devalued—or something that is simply unknown.



What constitutes bonding? Bonding begins when you make a commitment to understand your dog—to truly understand your *individual* dog. You can do some generalizing based on your dog’s breed, cross of breeds or even an indeterminable mix of breeds. You can learn to characterize your dog by the way he relates to other dogs—a dog that shows more leadership or

dominance over other dogs appears to be more alpha, for example. You can even generalize that certain traits seem to fit female dogs versus male dogs, or puppies versus older dogs, sporting breeds versus herding breeds, etc. But dogs are not simply dogs. As much as we would like to simplify the whole process of understanding them, the truth is that each dog is unique. Generalization based on breed or other factors may be helpful, but to understand each dog we must go much deeper. The first step in developing a strong bond with a dog is understanding that *particular* dog.

So bonding begins with understanding, and understanding makes the real training process begin. Why is this? Because the dog must trust you before you can teach him; he must be completely assured of your character, your ability to lead, your strength—your ability to protect him. The dog must be without any doubt, skepticism, suspicion or uncertainty. When we care enough about the dog to make a commitment to understand him—individually, behaviorally, truly on a personalized level, then we can offer him acceptance. Certainly not acceptance of behavior we find unacceptable, just acceptance of the dog himself, his basic character, his uniqueness. Dogs can sense this acceptance, the fact that we cherish them—they *know*. Then they are able to begin trusting, and the path to training them becomes so much smoother.

Once you give the gift of relationship through understanding and acceptance, a dog gives it back to you—in a loyalty rarely expressed in human relationships. This timeless, heartfelt expression of closeness between human and canine is the real key that opens the door to successful training. It is not methodology or technique. The combination of effective techniques and methodologies is important, but the decisive element is the relationship—the bond which develops once we understand our dog and earn his trust and respect.

So training begins—and is successful—when a dog is understood, accepted, loved and begins to trust. It proceeds further when the owner also understands how to make his dog feel safe and secure. Read the article entitled *the love languages of dogs* as well as *“Leader is not 4 letter word”* to see how this type of trust is made possible.

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