

Training issues vs. Management issues - Know the difference

by Melanie Travis Schlaginhaufen

Dog training programs can be incredibly effective. They can significantly strengthen our bond with our dogs. They can teach our dogs to respond to basic obedience commands (sit, down, stay, heel) and more advanced commands (off lead training). They even teach our dogs to perform tricks. With training we can also solve some behavioral problems—like jumping up or pulling on the leash. However, there are some problems that, while they get better, are never really solved. Why? Is it because the training hasn't worked? No. It is because we're dealing with a problem that is not a training issue—it's a management issue.

Veterinary behaviorists and dog trainers who specialize in solving behavioral problems develop behavior modification programs for dogs with management issues. Is this just an elaborate name for an upscale dog training program? No. It is a comprehensive program that may or may not involve dog training exercises, but definitely involves teaching us skills to manage our dog's behavior. Recommendations might include changes in the dog's environment, exercise routine, diet or even the use of medication.

What does this mean—a management plan? Management plans are for problems that require management in addition to training—for things that will always be a part of our dog's behavior. For example, a dog that has issues with other dogs will always have some issues with other dogs. A dog that is fearful will always have a fearful component to their personality. Can we modify their behavior to make it more beneficial to the dog and more acceptable to us? Yes! Can we totally solve the problem? Not always. Often we must learn to manage the problem. If the root of the problem lies in the genetic predisposition of the dog, and, if the issue is exacerbated by the dog's environment, then it will need to be managed throughout the dog's lifetime. We cannot change the fact that many dogs had “gaps” in their socialization process early in life. Nor can we change the genetic make-up of the dog's brain or the way in which the dog was bred to be—and we usually are not willing to make drastic changes in our lifestyle or the dog's environment. For example, if we live in an exclusive neighborhood that does not allow barrier fencing, few of us would be willing to sell our house and move into a neighborhood that would allow us to build a six foot privacy fence in order to prevent our dog from exhibiting territorial barking outside.

Management programs are very valuable, but when trainers fail to communicate the difference between management and training, dog owners become confused, disappointed, even frustrated when problems aren't solved. To help, let's identify some of the more common issues that require a management protocol, as opposed to training efforts alone:

1. Territorial Aggression—excessive barking, lunging and even biting of people who come into the yard

Usually the dog exhibits very little discrimination; he may be aggressive when anyone other than the owners come into the yard or into the house. At times, however, the aggression may be specifically directed toward, for example, deliverymen who arrive in big trucks. Often this behavior is “hard-wired” into a breed that was developed to guard, such as a Giant Schnauzer or a Doberman, so the dog is simply “doing his job”. Territorial Aggression, then, is usually a factor of the environment and the dog's instincts, so the problem must be managed by environmental changes—even if it means keeping this dog inside and allowing him to be outside only when he is with his owner and on leash. We would also implement a leadership program with training exercises that helped the dog understand that a human pack leader controls his territory.

2. Resource guarding dogs—dogs that are very protective over food, toys or their owner.

We can modify a dog's thresholds so that the behavior happens less often, but these dogs typically have the instinct to guard resources throughout their lifetime. Management of the problem would include not putting these dogs in situations that could elicit aggression, particularly around children. For example, they would rarely be given a high value food treat (such as a pig ear) to chew on. We can use training to convince them that adults may take items from them but it is highly unlikely that we can stop all of this behavior when other dogs or children are present; hence we must manage the environment to prevent guarding of high value items among those the dog perceives as “peers”.

3. Self control issues—relating to energy levels, dogs who are hyperactive and cannot control their excessive need for their owner's attention or who cannot seem to “settle” appropriately indoors. This type of behavior is very common in terrier breeds, in sporting breeds, and in herding dogs, specifically those who come from working lines which breed for a substantial amount of “drive”. Management of this problem includes increased exercise and providing “things to do” to keep the dog busy—or tired, as well as training in appropriate replacement behaviors.

4. Interactions in a multiple dog household—dogs who co-exist in limited space boundaries who growl at or attack housemates who enter their spaces

Dog-to-dog issues are sometimes the most serious of management issues. For example, two female dogs that have fought to the point of ripping and tearing can rarely ever be totally trusted to interact appropriately again. If kept in the same household, these dogs may always need to be separated. A more realistic option for some owners may be to consider finding a new home for one of the dogs.

5. True dominance behaviors—the dog who is genetically programmed to be a leader, who shows dominance to people in many different situations

Dominance is usually a behavior that occurs only in a small number of situations. A few dogs are true leaders and will attempt to be dominant in almost every situation. We can teach dogs to be subordinate to adults in the household, but it is impossible to convince these kinds of dogs that they are not higher in rank than the small children in the household. Management includes placing these dogs in homes without small children. It also requires the owner's full understanding of the dog's temperament and a true commitment to protect visitors, extended family and friends from a potentially dangerous interaction with the dog.

6. Breed Characteristics—Examples of breed behaviors include inappropriate herding by Shelties who nip at heels or Australian Shepherds who chase children on bicycles, Huskies who run unidirectionally and do not come when called; American Pit Bull Terriers who will attack other dogs; Rottweilers who are overprotective of their owners; breed specific traits are not always positive. These traits directly correspond to the original purpose for the development of the breed. As a result, they are “hard-wired” into most individual dogs that represent these breeds. To manage the breed behavior of the Siberian Husky, for example, we would allow him to run in a fenced area only and always have him on leash when outside of a fenced area.

7. Extremely fearful dogs—These dogs usually respond extremely well to comprehensive behavior modification programs that include increasing the dog's confidence level and lowering his fear level. However, this is a problem that still needs to be managed throughout the dog's lifetime, we would never put this dog in a situation that could cross a threshold he could reasonably be expected to tolerate. Fear issues are more common in the more sensitive breeds such as Shepherds who have been bred to be supersensitive to their environment. When these dogs, for example, were in charge of watching the sheep, they had to be particularly sensitive to any movement that might indicate danger. . In particular, these dogs will always have



a lower tolerance to stress, and we would never put them in a situation which might cause their fear to become so great that they might bite. I want to reiterate that all of the above behaviors can be modified through a behavior modification program which includes training exercises, changes in environment, and medication if necessary. However, the major component in modifying the behavior of dogs with these problems involves management, the owner's willingness to make the dog's environment less conducive to practicing the negative behavior and the owner's commitment to prevent the dog from being in situations that may endanger the dog, other dogs, or, more importantly, other humans.

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