

# **“WE ALREADY DID TRAINING, BUT...”**

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I can't tell you how many of my students have come to me and begun their explanation of their dogs' issues with the above. Many times, the owner of a dog who's already "done training" really *hasn't* done any training. He may have taken his dog as a pup to a socialization or manners class and ended things there. Now Pup is a three year old with a host of bad habits. Other owners try to do their training at home, using what seemed to have been sufficient for their last dog. They usually find out the hard way that not all dogs are the same, and that what worked beautifully for Ol' Shep might not be as effective for Young Buck. As they wait for Young Buck to grow out of the offending behaviors, he instead grows *into* them, becoming a practiced hooligan by his second birthday.

Other owners have actually been to formal obedience classes, but don't finish the course due to problems with scheduling. This is not the fault of the dog or the instructor, or even the owner, but it rests on the owner to find a way to keep the training going so that he can achieve at least some success. Many instructors offer private lessons in addition to their group classes so that the owner with a hectic schedule can have some flexibility. Although private lessons are more expensive, these days more owners are finding the flexibility and personal attention worth every penny.

Finally, some owners quit a training class out of personal discomfort. In their advice to owners seeking training help, many dog magazines, websites and training authors put a lot of emphasis on the owner's comfort level, with the admonition to leave if the trainer or instructor makes the owner uncomfortable. I think this is terrible advice. Some people will be made dreadfully uncomfortable by the thought of giving a collar correction, others by the thought of using food to teach the dog, others by being told what to do in front of a group, regardless of how necessary the offensive action might be for the success of the dog. If the same advice was given to kids, no one would get an education! If the instructor's dog or the dogs of his students are

acting the way you want *your* dog to act, put aside your personal feelings for a few minutes and keep your eyes on the prize of a well-adjusted, well-behaved dog. If it makes you uncomfortable to be told or shown what to do by a person who has obviously been very successful at achieving the results you are seeking for yourself, then you should either find someone who can provide those same results in a way you find more palatable, or you should show the same kind of emotional fortitude you'd expect of your 12 year old who hates his math teacher. Many a dog's happiness has been sacrificed on the altar of his owner's hypersensitivity.

So far, I've addressed all of the people who've not really "done training". For whatever reason, they opted out of a program without seeing it all the way through.

But what about the others?

The ones who faithfully attended every class, practiced every exercise in their take home sheets, went through each progression of each level offered at the training school for months or years, and still can't rely on their dog's responsiveness in the real world? Where do *they* come from?

They're the collateral damage of the new training climate, in which everyone from a BS in Animal Behavior to a successful completer of a multiple choice exam, from a franchise employee to a girl who works at the vet's office, is a dog training expert. These owners are the walking wounded of the training methodology holy wars: people whose square-peg dogs don't conveniently fit into the ideological round holes of management, medication, pseudo-"dog friendly" training tools, and one-size-fits-all voodoo of the experts they consult. A reactive dog made even more aggressive by "growl classes" given by the enlightened humane society is as much a victim as the same dog bullied into defensiveness by the local bellow-and-choke specialist. His owners "did training". A spooky dog who frantically goes through every operant behavior in a desperate attempt to get a treat but who still darts behind her owner's legs at the sight of a stranger is no more secure than the same dog dragged through a huge, chaotic group class at the rec center. Her owners "did training", too. And the people paying \$200 an hour for a sit down with a behaviorist who prescribes a questionable medication and an eternal desensitization program that will cause them to quit their day job in order to fulfill its requirements have been chumped as badly as the ones who spend a fortune to have a famous trainer or her minions make a one-stop housecall to solve their problems. Expensively, embarrassingly, they "did training", too.

And none of it worked.

If you are going to pay someone to help you train your dog, you have to enter the endeavor with as much intelligent suspicion as if you were hiring someone to tutor your child, or if you'd prefer not to anthropomorphize, as if you were hiring someone to tune and repair your \$150,000 sports car.

If the trainer you hire cannot in a two month period teach your dog to walk on a slack leash around distraction; to sit until released in the presence of food, other dogs, or strangers; to recognize and respond to his name when called on the first command; to lie down quietly at your feet while you watch television or read email; and to stay in a spot at least twenty feet away from you for several minutes, then he is not really training your dog. This applies to dogs with behavior problems including aggression: no one should ask a trainer to make an aggressive dog "like" other dogs and/or people in a short period of time. Though it can be done in some situations, for purposes of discussion, we are only looking to control the dog's responses when confronted with his fears or hatreds. Addressing the dog's particular issues is much more successful when the relationship between him and his owner is solid: and nothing gives definition and clarity to a dog better than a simple course of real-life balanced obedience training. If it is taught correctly and with a plan in mind, obedience provides the first coherent language for the owner and dog to share. Once in place, they can have the conversation necessary to address their issues.

How you and your trainer achieve this will vary. A good trainer will do what works, what is easy for the owner to replicate and for the dog to understand, and what provides real world results in a reasonable period of time. He will not get bound up in adhering to a political doctrine about training equipment or methods, he will not exclude any humane possibility from the equation, and he will define "humane" in a manner which constitutes common sense and fairness from the dog's point of view, not based on human emotional reactions or dubious "scientific studies". The goal will be to have your dog working with you and comprehending your expectations without tools or bribes, and his training plan will be an obvious road to that outcome. Along the way, he will show you his dog or the dogs of his other students doing what you expect your dog to do: he is a "walker", not just a "talker": his results should speak for themselves and give you hope for your own dog. And if your dog is beyond that good trainer's experiential or comfort level, he will refer to a suitable colleague. It's that simple.

It has always bothered me that so many of my students have already “done training” and been disappointed. I tell them that I want to be the last trainer they ever need to consult and that they and their dog deserve the good life that results-based training can bring them. I’m grateful that they trust me with their education, but I mourn for all of the dogs and people whose lives together are compromised forever because they “already did training” two, three or four times already and have run out of trust and cash.

**If you haven’t “done training” with us yet, then maybe you have not “done training”.**

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