

# **New Rules for Puppies**

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## **Dominance is old hat. Rank reduction rules are out, but that doesn't mean that anarchy should rule your house**

The new views on canine behaviour have called into question whether our dogs are really mini wolves, ready to challenge and take over at any time when they see the opportunity to get up the imagined 'social ladder'. And thank goodness for that! Frankly if all the dogs in the world that have been labelled as dominant really were, we'd be in terrible trouble. Instead, new thinking (in both the canine and human world) is looking at the possibility that in order to be a social species, only the team-players survive. This move away from believing that owners need to dominate their dogs to be good 'leaders' is refreshing indeed, but what about real life? How to we ensure that our dogs grow up to be well behaved canine citizens and not ASBO candidates?

To me, throwing out the old rank reduction rules does not mean throwing out basic boundaries, or – perhaps an old fashioned concept – manners! Just like people, puppies differ greatly in temperament, confidence and motivation. This can mean that while one owner can get away with allowing their puppy to do almost whatever he or she likes from day one, another may discover that the dog is unbearable to live with after only a few weeks – or even days – and that in order to channel their behaviour, they need to stick to some basic house rules. All dogs are self-interested creatures. They will do what works for them, what makes them feel good, and what gets them what they want. This is not aspirational dominance, it's just how they are (and how we are too, if you really think about it!) This means that any new set of rules has to take into account the simple adage: what gets rewarded, gets repeated. Here's my list of rules – each of them aspects of behaviour that I hear owners complain about in their adult dogs, and know that they could have prevented from ever happening in the first place. Of course, each dog and every family is different, so have a think about what would be on your list!

### 1. No barking for attention

All dogs bark, but some more so than others. What determines this will be a combination of genetic propensity and what they have learned! If you have a bright puppy, chances are that it won't take him long to discover that sitting next to the biscuit cupboard and barking loudly brings rewards if you make yourself a trainable human and give in. Alternatively, rewards often come in the form of frowns, eye contact and stern words. For a puppy with a sense of humour, this is hilarious fun!

Action: Make sure you don't inadvertently reward barking by giving your dog attention, or whatever it is that he wants – unless you are happy to live with the consequences. Dogs bark for all kinds of reasons, but 'demanding with menaces' is high on many dogs' lists of successful strategies. Ignore it completely (no telling off, no eye contact, no touching) – and walk out of the room if you need to, to ensure that 'shouting at you' never works.

### 2. No winding up your 'parents'

Practically compulsory for adolescents of all species, getting a reaction from your 'parents' (or owners, in this case) is actually learned in the early days of puppyhood. Dogs watch us all the time, and some just love to get a reaction from their own behaviour – whether it's positive or negative. For this reason, dogs learn to steal items and run off with them, grab trouser legs and dressing gowns cords, pester you while you're watching TV, jump all over unsuspecting visitors and a million other irritating behaviours. Of course, the only reason that dogs ever learn to get your goat is that they found out where it was tethered in

the first place! Reacting to your dog's behaviour – especially in a dramatic and exciting way – tells your dog that this is the behaviour that presses your buttons.

Action: Keep calm! Of course, it's not always possible to simply ignore your puppy's experimental behaviour, but your interventions need to be as fun-free and low-key as possible.

### 3. Avoid self-reinforcing behaviours

This list contains all those behaviours which are fun for your dog whether you are involved or not.

Chasing, pulling on lead, begging at table, running off on walks and licking the plates in the dishwasher are just a few of the behaviours which need to be avoided to prevent your dog discovering what a joy they are and forming behaviours which will last for life. Such behaviours are all too easily learned and are highly resistant to later 'untraining' – simply because once such forbidden fruits are tasted, the addiction remains forever! Of course, the problem here is that we tend to look at puppies differently from adult dogs. A puppy looks positively cute chasing the kids round the garden – and their squealing and laughter is going to encourage him too – but when the same dog does it only a few months later, it seems threatening and aggressive, not fun and bouncy.

Action: Make a list of the behaviours that are 'out of bounds' for your hound at the beginning of your relationship, and stick to it! This means you, your family and even visiting friends all need to stick to these rules in order for your dog to live within them happily. Consistency may be a rather old fashioned word, but it's just what most dogs need in order to be live with humans successfully.

### 4. Socialise and train, train, train!

Puppyhood passes so quickly that it's gone in the blink of an eye. All those good intentions need to be put into action if they are not simply to be intentions forever. Puppies need so much more socialisation than we often anticipate – with both people and other dogs – and probably more training than we generally anticipate, too. Of course, many owners are lulled into the false perception that dogs train themselves – that their new dog will somehow know how to behave just like the old one did, or that dogs instinctively understand how to live in a home environment with all the modern stresses and strains that come with it. Training is not just teaching sits and downs. Training is lifelong learning. It's giving the dog a belief that to comply with human oddities and demands is rewarding – at least most of the time anyway. If you want a dog that will truly fit in with your family and lifestyle, then you need to put the time, effort and energy into training it to do so.

Action: Start socialising and training from day one. Decide what's important to you and be persistent with both preventative and pro-active training. Training is not just about attending a class or about bending your dog's will in certain circumstances when you encounter a problem. After all, you clean your teeth every day, not just the night before you see the dentist. Training can offer a solid foundation to your whole relationship, and will make your dog's life easier in nearly every situation. Make it part of your routine.