

The KISS principle (Keep it simple, silly!)

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Dog training in the pub? While sitting in your armchair? Surely it shouldn't be this easy?

Like most areas of life, dog training and the resolution of behaviour problems are often best handled with simplicity. Despite the inherent complexity of how many problems arise, how they have become entrenched and how they have been resistant to previous change, it is nearly always the simple approach that ends up having most impact. Indeed, as one proverb tells us, it is not always the amount of leverage that is applied to a problem that matters, but where that leverage is applied.

Simple approaches in behaviour problem resolution are often looked down on by those who are – frankly – more theoretical in their approach than practical. Surely, complex problems need complex answers? Well, I think not, because for the vast majority of owners, it is often the simple, easy-to-follow suggestions that are likely to be implemented – and have an advantageous, sometimes immediate effect.

Of course, simplicity is also the key to the prevention of problems in dogs too. Take, for example, the humble “sit”. Teach this reliably and you have an almost immediate “inoculation” against an endless range of inappropriate behaviours that you wish your dog wouldn't engage in – including everything from jumping up on visitors to chasing deer in the woods. Teach this at a distance, (see www.dogstardaily.com for some fabulous tips on this) and you have even more control – and even more chances of preventing (and resolving) trouble-making behaviour.

So, here is one of my top exercises to teach dogs to both prevent and help in the resolution of behaviour problems: simple, practical and effective!

Settle down. My word! The best kept dog training exercise on the planet. There are so many times when the settle down is useful, I can barely begin to tell you. As the owner of a very active Collie/ Jack Russell first-cross, I can honestly say that this exercise has saved my sanity, the furniture, and much angst for both me and my dog. All puppies and dogs should learn this exercise – to lie down and be calm when told – no matter how excited or active they are before or after. This is the canine equivalent of an on/off switch. Waiting is boring for many dogs, and without training in how to cope with it, the frustration that can arise from inactivity can lead to all kinds of issues. You only have to think about how humans feel when stuck in traffic jams to be able to empathise with this.

For this reason, the settle down is perfect for the vet's waiting room, the pub, the times when you have to hang about at dog training classes, or simply when visitors arrive and your dog would like to bounce all over them, but you would very much prefer that he didn't. This exercise is different from a down stay, as the focus is on relaxing and being calm, rather than remaining rigidly in one position. Once expert at the settle down, a dog should be able to go from rip-roaring wildness to instant settle down in the blink of an eye – all on one single, quiet suggestion. Of course, this also has the advantage of looking magnificently professional.

Teaching the settle down is easy. In fact it's so easy that you can even watch TV at the same time.

- Take your dog to somewhere both you and he are going to be comfortable. In the initial stages, it's probably best to avoid interruptions and distractions. I find that my favourite armchair in the lounge is the perfect place!
- Have your dog on an ordinary lead, preferably one that you don't love. This is because your dog may try to chew the lead, and if he does, it's important that you can happily ignore the behaviour.
- Sit down and put the middle of the lead on the floor. Put your foot firmly on the middle point of the lead, so that your dog can comfortably stand up and sit and lie down, but cannot move around in order to find things to chew, or otherwise engage himself in more exciting activities.
- Now all you have to do is sit back and wait. With his options limited, your dog will probably try a number of things in order to amuse himself, or gain your attention. He may chew the lead (ignore!), he may bark at you (really ignore!). He may strain on the lead (make sure you keep that lead firmly anchored in place). He may even try the very behaviour that you would like to be resolved. (Wow, that tells you something about just how rewarding he finds that particular behaviour.) Finally though (for most dogs about four minutes, but some may keep trying annoying behaviours for longer), he may well heave a big sigh of resignation and lie down on the floor. At this point, all you have to do is calmly, quietly, tell him he's the perfect pet, and give him some very gentle strokes. If, at this point, he leaps back up again, convinced that that his the signal to become a whirling dervish once again, simply go back to ignoring and wait some more. This is important because your dog needs to have a clear difference
- When you have finished the exercise (anything from two minutes to begin with), give your dog a release word that means he can get up and move around now, in conjunction with unclipping the lead. This will form a clear signal that the exercise is over.
- Once your dog starts to understand that the lead on the floor means 'just give in and lie down, nothing is going to happen, it's very boring and you may as well have a snooze' you can add a command to the behaviour. Say this just before you start the exercise, and – in the best traditions- 'say thees only once'. I like the obvious, "Settle down", but owners in my classes say "Chill", "Relax," or any other command that they fancy (and are going to remember).

This exercise is more about human resolve than it is about time or effort. Depending on how active your dog is, and how difficult he or she finds coping with frustration, the amount of time it will take to teach will vary. However, it's hardly arduous (you are, after all, sitting in your own lounge watching TV or reading a book!), so be prepared to make a consistent and persistent effort with it. I usually recommend having a 'settle down' session every night for a week. You'll be amazed at the result. After that, you need to take your dog into another room and then practise there: then the hallway, then the garden. You get the picture. Once the behaviour is established in the house and garden, your mission is to practise 'settle down' out and about, anywhere and everywhere – the pub, the training class, the park, the supermarket car park, the shoe shop: you name it.

In my experience, teaching the settle down is not only a practical way of keeping your dog calm and his behaviour impeccable in social circles. Learning to adopt a calm posture has the interesting effect of giving calm feedback to the dog's brain. In other words, if you act calm, you will start to feel calm. For dogs with behavioural issues such as anxiety, this can be the catalyst for a major breakthrough. For those that have no issues, but are simply full of the joys of Spring, it can mean more excursions into the big wide world, more fun and more opportunities to socialise – and what could be better than that?