

No treats, just training and lots of 'good dog!'

Easthampton trainer's approach: Patience and praise better than food in long run

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To train a healthy and happy pet, try discipline, exercise and love - and forget the treats.

Treats have proven to be an effective method of training, but Linda Ducharme of Easthampton, a dog trainer for 18 years, rarely uses them. In her view, they cause weight gain and loss of respect for the treat-giver.

"When a dog is working for treats ... that's exactly what they're working for," said Ducharme. "I want the dog to work for me. I've never been a treat trainer, ever. I'm more into bonding with the dog."

Patience, praise and correction are more effective, Ducharme said. Training dogs when they are young is also important, she added.

"Today it seems most people want and expect a quick fix for their dogs' training," Ducharme said. "Training is like anything else. The more time you devote, the more success you will have."

Ducharme, who owns Chain of Command Professional Dog Training in Easthampton, works with both dogs and their owners. She trains the animals in their home, a familiar and comfortable setting for them to learn.

"The best place to begin is in the house," said Ducharme, who is 63. "Each new step is progress for the dog, from the house to the yard to the park."

When Ducharme first meets a client, she simply observes - how the dog interacts with its owner, how the owner interacts with the dog, how the dog behaves - and then she starts working. She doesn't give the dog attention right away, as she wants the dog to know she is establishing a respectful working relationship. In other words, to receive praise the dog must earn it first.

The dog's physical health is another key to training success, Ducharme said. If the dog is chewing itself, it could have a skin problem, fleas or ticks. Chewing may also indicate nervousness or boredom. A dog who bites people may be aggressive, angry or fearful, Ducharme said.

"Fear is a learned behavior," Ducharme said. "Dogs should not be afraid."

Ducharme next evaluates the animal's behavior. Behavioral issues and physical issues often are intertwined, she said. Tail chasing and constant licking could be a sign of obsessive compulsiveness, she said. Fearful dogs may jump up or hide when reacting to loud noises or strange objects. Ducharme's goal is to help unmanageable dogs or young puppies mature into well-behaved dogs, she said.

"Dogs should overcome fear in their lifetime," Ducharme said. "You want them to become the most confident dog they can be. You want them to feel comfortable in their own skin."

Training session

One of Ducharme's weekly clients is Sam, a 6-month-old yellow Labrador retriever, with his owners, Kathy and Jim Bonafilia of Easthampton. At 6:30 p.m., Sam was wearing his collar and leash, and began his session by walking around the kitchen island with Jim Bonafilia. Bonafilia passed the leash to his wife, and they took turns managing their dog. A lively and attentive puppy, Sam seemed ready to learn after his warm-up walk.

In fact, most dogs are ready to learn, according to Ducharme.

"Dogs love to learn," Ducharme said. "They are happiest when they are doing what they're supposed to do. Sam's a retriever, so he loves to retrieve. If he's being taught what he's bred to do, he's much happier."

Perhaps Sam's favorite item to retrieve is his squishy Barbie ball, which he enjoyed nibbling between lessons one October evening.

"It's time to learn again," Ducharme whispered to Sam, who then dropped the ball. "Now we're going to learn something new."

In this session, Sam learned the "come" command. After giving the command, the Bonafilias pointed to the ground and said "sit." In time, they won't need to say "sit," as the dog already will have learned the action and will apply it out of habit, Ducharme said. Ducharme noted the importance of making the command cheerful because a cheery voice is a treat in itself.

"Of course the dog is going to come if you give it a (food) treat," Ducharme said. "You don't ever want the 'come' command to be a game."

Besides the pet learning from its owner, the owner can learn from the pet. To understand the dog's perception, Ducharme reads its facial expression and body language.

"I think dogs can teach owners how to get along with them," Ducharme said. "The look on the dog will tell you a lot. Timing is important in training because dogs think and hear in the present."

If the dog looks tired, distracted or bored, it needs a break, because when treated with aggression, the dog will respond with aggression, Ducharme said.

"The calmer you are, the calmer your dog will be," Ducharme said. "Dogs teach us a lot about love and a lot about patience if we give them the time. A lot of people don't give the time."

Kathy Bonafilia said she noticed that Sam tries to adapt to the family because he learns from his actions, as he did after she repeatedly moved him away from sitting in front of the stove and sink when she was working in the kitchen.

"Now he goes to the side because I think he's thinking, 'I'm not supposed to be there,'" Bonafilia said.

Of the training, Kathy Bonafilia said about Sam, "He has learned a lot. Linda's been great. She explains how he thinks and how he learns."

Ducharme, who has three dogs, said that during a time when she worked three jobs, her dogs knew when she was going to work and how long she would be gone. They knew this simply by observing their owner - sounds, sights and smells, Ducharme said.

"My dogs have taught me so much," said Ducharme, who also boards dogs. "They read us better than we read them. They know when we're going, where we're going. I think the more time, training and love we give a dog, the more they give to people."

Sam's training has taught the Bonafilias how to give and receive unconditional love, patience and stability, Jim Bonafilia said. Ducharme noted that her relationship with Sam is professional, which is necessary because owners have a personal relationship with their pets before and after the training lesson. Sam knows when his trainer comes, it is time to work and learn, Ducharme said. When she leaves, it is time for the Bonafilias to practice, play, and praise a job well done.

"Training is stick-to-it-ness for both of you," Kathy Bonafilia said.