

Beth Bradley
Dog Trainer/Behaviorist
(201) 247-8472
www.dog-trainer.biz

Learned Disobedience

I am working with a young German Shepherd Female who the owners classified as 'stubborn'. I have discovered that not only is she anxious but she has learned to be disobedient. Her anxiety is a direct result of not knowing who the Alpha, or top dog or leader is. (The Alpha is the leader of the human and/or dog family pack. The Alpha can be you the human [preferable] or because nature hates a void, one of the dogs might step in and become the Alpha.)

My client's German Shepherd is constantly challenging the other dogs but when they correct her she immediately becomes submissive. Instead of her owners reprimanding the behavior, they are leaving it to the other dogs, and she is not learning. When she reacts like an Alpha should, the owners reprimand, but they do not reprimand in other situations so she is undecided about her place in the pack.

Not only is she anxious, she has learned to be disobedient, she is ***not stubborn***. She has learned that if she does not respond to their commands and she acts fearful or nervous they will do one of the following: (1) praise her (2) place her into the position (learned helplessness) (3) give up or (4) start talking about how stubborn she is and then the moment is gone.

So, I want to address each of their mistakes:

(1) **Praise for Fear**. This dog has learned if she acts frightened or upset, they pet her instead of giving a correction. So in essence she gets praised for being fearful and is getting away with being disobedient. What she must learn is it doesn't matter if you are upset, you must respond to the command.

(2) **Placing her into position**; again if the dog understands the command, do not place her into position. To the dog it means, if I get upset, they will assist me into compliance. Here the dog has learned helplessness; I can't possibly respond under this stress so I will do nothing and my owners will help me and then reward me after they have helped me.

(3) **Giving up/giving in**; If your dog absolutely understands the command, a correction should be applied immediately when the dog does not respond. This may mean spending an hour working on one command until the dog gives in. A dog does

what is good for him/her, if you give up, he/she will learn that if they wait you out, you get frustrated and they win (they do not have to respond).

(4) **Right timing;** Right timing is very important. Ideally you should correct your dog when you catch him in the act and reward him as soon as he performs the correct behavior. That means, 100% focus on your dog, especially if you have an issue that you are working on i.e. growling, etc. You must immediately correct any form of aggression or misbehavior because, if not, then your dog will seek out opportunities when you are distracted to act out. You know how your Mom always said 'she had eyes in the back of her head'; you must be like Mom.

The Correction: The correction should immediately stop the disobedience. If your dog returns to this behavior, then your correction was not meaningful enough. If the verbal correction is enough and your dog does not return to the disobedient behavior, then there is no reason to physically correct. But if your dog does return to being disobedient you didn't make a big enough impression on him. It doesn't matter what method of compulsion you use as long as your dog responds, respects and learns from the correction.

The Cure: Exercise, Training and Consistency:

So let's fast forward to this dog spending 48 hours alone with me. She knows I am the Alpha, so there is no challenging of any person or dog. The anxiety has been replaced with complete adherence to the rules of the pack.

Exercise: She has received a lot of exercise, in the form of the treadmill and hikes in the woods. She is on the treadmill for 3 miles per day at a trot and is taking hikes with the other dogs; her physical energy has been spent so she is not anxious and looks forward to quiet times in her crate. Exercise is also great for anxiety. Research on anxiety, depression and exercise shows that the psychological and physical benefits of exercise can also help reduce anxiety and improve mood (Mayo Clinic).

Training: Daily training will help you understand how to deal with any obstacles so your dog can grow into a well mannered part of human society. Training is expelling your dog's mental energy, and if you have expelled his physical and mental energy he will be calm. Not only that, daily training teaches your dog that you are his Alpha, so the stress of who is in charge is eliminated.

Consistency: Confusion arises when you are not consistent with your commands. Do not say "down" one day and "lie down" another, this will confuse your dog. You will also confuse your dog if you allow him to pull you when walking in the neighborhood but demand him to heel correctly at your side during training. Do not yell commands one day and whisper commands another day. Do not prioritize commands and become sterner with certain commands over others.

Dogs do not know which commands are more important to you, nor can they show their immediate response to which one YOU think is more critical. In addition, the consistency in corrections is also important. Many handlers are harder on their dogs in a class environment and more lenient at home. The dog then associates the training field or class with harsh corrections and that is why we see the tail drop, in a training scenario.

Consistency with your training equipment is equally important. You can't put the training collar and leash on the dog only when he is behaving badly. Then your dog thinks you only require proper behavior at certain times and he can be wild or disobey when the collar is off.

Conclusion:

Too often I hear clients say out loud, 'I wish he would listen like this at home' or 'why does he listen to you?' The reasoning behind this is you have not established clear rules of behavior. Your dog knows how he must immediately respond when I am near him but also knows you cave in and can waiver in your position of Alpha; i.e. Learned Disobedience.