

Creating Structure

Beth Bradley

Most young dogs are eager to please. They want to make you happy and yet their behavior very often achieves the opposite effect. You may wonder how your dog could possibly think that by stealing your shoes he will increase your happiness. The answer is simple: He's a dog. His perspective is completely different from yours. He thinks he is livening up your dreadfully boring day by initiating a game of grab-the-shoe. Until he is reliably trained, his choices will be based on trial and error and a flawed interpretation of desirable behavior. In the meantime, you must provide structure that limits his chances of making bad choices. When dogs stay with me for training, their day has a simple structure: Eat, drink, walk/play/train, crate time, repeat. This structure facilitates successful training, provides the security of predictability, and ensures that the dog's "free time" is supervised.

What your dog learns when you provide structure

1. *There is a time for running and playing, and a time for being quiet and "chill."* Structure teaches your dog to accommodate the "down time" that you and he so desperately need. You need time when you can focus on other responsibilities without worrying if Fido is entertaining himself by finding out how long it takes to eat a couch. But just as importantly, your young dog needs time to rest and settle down. Building quiet time into the structure of your dog's day prevents him from becoming over-stimulated and out of control. With adequate exercise, most dogs quickly learn to accommodate down time as part of their routine.
2. *I do not need to panic when I am left alone. I have a safe, quiet place of my own where I can rest.* Containing your untrained dog when you cannot give him your full attention is just good sense. It not only protects your belongings, it keeps him safe. Don't think of your dog's crate as jail; think as a beneficial and necessary part of the structure of his day. If your dog's crate or pen is part of his regular routine, he will see it as his own personal safety zone.
3. *I know what my person expects from me.* When my "training in progress" dogs are out in the house or outdoors they have my full attention. I build time into the structure of my day when I am not distracted by other dogs, visitors, or phone calls. I am completely focused on watching and reading them. If they are obedient, I can reward immediately. If they are disobedient, I can correct and guide them to the correct behavior so I can reward. Building a structure that includes times of total focus allows you to make your training very clear to your dog.
4. *I can relax because life follows a pretty predictable pattern.* When you create structure for your young dog, you help him to be calm and well adjusted. You ensure that he gets regular, appropriate exercise and attention each day, and that he is not getting into trouble when you cannot give him your full attention. Structure removes the stress of your dog having to "figure things out."

What your dog learns when left to roam unsupervised

1. *The rules change—and the only way to figure them out is to test them.* Dogs learn quickly that distracted handlers allow them to get away with disobedience. For example, if you are on the phone and your dog wanders into the other room—where you suspect he will find some mischief—you call him to come. He doesn't. You cover the phone and hiss, "Come here right now!" Nope. So rather than interrupt your friend on the other end of the phone you get up and follow your dog into the other room to see what he is up to. Sure enough, he's pulling shoes out from under your bed. You lure him out of the bedroom with a treat, shut the door so he can't get back in, and resume your conversation with your friend. Crisis averted—or so you think. Your shoes are safe for the moment, but here's what your dog took away from this experience: *I don't have to come when I'm called and if I get to the shoes I get a treat.* So he will be understandably confused when the next time he gets to your shoes you yell at him. From his perspective, there's really no telling what you will do when he plays with your shoes, so he figures he might as well play the odds.
2. *I'm just a bad, bad dog.* When you are busy and you catch your dog getting into mischief, you are likely to correct and then return to what you were doing. He sits quietly for a minute or two, but that doesn't seem to impress you, so he gets bored and wanders off looking for something else to do. If he is untrained or partially trained, his next activity is probably trouble also. So you correct again—"NO! Bad dog!"—and return to what you are doing. After several repetitions, your dog is left feeling like his every move leads to a correction. He has no clear understanding of exactly what he is doing wrong because it seems like everything is wrong and nothing is right. A correction should not only stop unacceptable behavior, but also lead into a desired behavior for which you can praise him and build him up. If he is nosing in the trash and you correct him, you must take the time to praise him when he stops on your command. Follow up with a sit or down command and praise him for that. Your praise for his good behavior should more than make up for the correction. If you don't have time to follow up on corrections by teaching an acceptable alternative behavior and praising him, your dog should not be roaming the house. Corrections that are not followed by structured redirection will create a sulky and nervous dog.

Conclusion

Too often I hear clients in class say out loud, "I wish he would listen like this at home." Dogs usually behave in class because they recognize that there is an established routine with clear rules of behavior. It's much easier for your dog to do what you want if he knows what you want him to do. If you find that your dog is not as well behaved at home, it is likely that you have allowed gray areas to invade the way you interact with your dog at home.

People often make the mistake of thinking their dogs are happier with fewer restrictions and more “freedom.” In fact, as pack animals, dogs are happiest when they know what to expect and what is expected. If you establish and maintain structure for your dog at home, his behavior will reflect the benefits of clear boundaries and a regular routine. With structure, he feels secure. The more secure he is, the more stable and well behaved he will be. And that makes everyone happy.

About Beth Bradley

As one of the top professional trainers and competitors in the United States, Beth is committed to improving the lives of dogs and people through training. She teaches group classes and private lessons in basic and advanced obedience, competition dog training, puppy training, Schutzhund training, personal protection, Canine Good Citizenship, and therapy dog training. Beth also trains and places service dogs for children with autism and custom trains “cross-trained” companion/protection dogs for families and individuals. She consults for shelters in the tri-state area and for New Jersey law enforcement on cases involving canine behavior and temperament.

Beth began studying animal behavior and dog training at age twelve. She has worked and studied under many renowned animal behaviorists and trainers. After graduating from Rutgers University with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice, Beth worked as a New Jersey State Animal Control Officer. In 1989, she founded her own company and has made dog training and consulting her full-time career since 1995. Competing with her dogs, Beth has earned national and international titles and championships in both Schutzhund and AKC Obedience. In 2003 and 2009, she represented the United States in the FCI World Trials. In 2015, Beth and her dog Fyte qualified for the elite team representing the United States at the WUSV in Finland. Although Fyte is the youngest qualifying dog in the history of this worldwide competition, Beth and Fyte ranked third among the US competitors and posted scores that placed the US team in the top ten. Competing with Beth nationally, Fyte earned the title of USCA IPO 2015 Vice Champion.

Beth is the author of *Real World Dog Training*, and has produced a number of training DVDs and videos. In addition, Beth trains and handles dogs for movies, television, and theater, with recent credits including appearances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, *Board Walk Empire*, the *Batman* franchise, *Damages*, *Blue Bloods*, *The Good Wife*, and *The Blacklist*.

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