

Always Err on the Side of Caution

Beth Bradley

Often, I am called to do an evaluation of a dog and the prospective client says, "I'm not sure how he is going to be. Sometimes he is nice, and sometimes he tries to bite." At the other extreme is the super-friendly dog. This dog gets so excited when meeting new people that his ability to focus on and obey a command is a 50/50 proposition at best. Although these two types of dogs seem like polar opposites, they have one significant trait in common: They are unpredictable. Young dogs are particularly likely to be unpredictable. However, dogs of any age can be unpredictable. If you have any doubts about how your dog will act or react in any given situation, you should err on the side of caution. Is it possible you will sometimes be taking more precautions than may be necessary? Absolutely. But, as the saying goes, better safe than sorry.

Aggression

If you find that your dog sometimes behaves aggressively, and you cannot predict when it will happen, then you must approach every situation with the assumption that he will behave aggressively. Aggressive behavior leaves no room for mistakes. Taking a chance to see what your dog will do could be a catastrophic experiment.

The risks

- Your dog could seriously injure someone.
- We live in a litigious society; even if your dog inflicts only a minor injury, you could end up facing a major lawsuit.
- Depending on your local and state laws, an aggressive incident could result in your dog being taken from you and possibly even euthanized.

The precautions

Consult a professional trainer who can help you safely address the problem and who can teach you the signals your dog gives that aggression is imminent. Resolving aggressive tendencies can take much time and training. In the meantime, do not allow your dog to meet or approach other people or dogs. Even if you think your dog is feeling calm and friendly in a particular situation, don't take any chances. Err on the side of caution.

Exuberance

The rambunctiously friendly and playful dog can be as unpredictable—and in some ways as dangerous-- as the aggressive dog. If you have an exuberant dog with poor impulse control, you must be vigilant at avoiding situations where his unpredictable energy could put him or others at risk.

The risks

- If your dog's movements are fast, forceful, and unexpected, he can cause significant injury, even if his intentions are playful.
- An overly rambunctious dog can run into danger—such as darting into the road-- without warning.
- A dog who runs rampant during play will eventually run rampant in every situation.
- Crazy behavior that seems funny or cute in a pup or new dog will eventually be the behavior that drives you crazy.
- Rambunctious dogs often fail to observe “doggie etiquette” when meeting other dogs. Your dog's lack of manners may elicit an aggressive response from other dogs because they may view your dog's behavior as a challenge or sign of disrespect.

The precautions

Help your dog use up excess energy with long walks. Teach him that even playtime has rules, and that out of control behavior is unacceptable. An exuberant dog is often eager to please, so if you are consistent in your expectations, he will probably try to obey even when he is full of energy. However, in many cases, truly reliable impulse control comes only with maturity.

In the meantime, keep your dog on a leash when you are out and about. Don't allow your exuberant dog to freely approach visitors to your home—especially small children or elderly people who could be knocked down by his “greeting.” Because your rambunctious dog has trouble controlling himself, you must be the control that keeps him—and others--safe. If your dog's playfulness tends to get out of control, err on the side of caution.

Obedience

By definition, obedience should be predictable. You should never say to yourself, “Let’s see if Fido is going to obey.” That puts Fido in control of the situation and, most of the time, Fido’s priorities are vastly different from yours. Although taking a chance on disobedience may not seem like a dangerous problem, every instance of disobedience that your dog gets away with sets his training back.

The risks

- A dog that views obedience as “optional” is not trained.
- When your response to disobedience is inconsistent, your dog gets confused. He could become anxious and fearful because he doesn’t know what to expect.
- If you do not consistently expect obedience, your dog could begin to view himself as the “Alpha.” Soon, he will expect you to follow his rules rather than the other way around!
- Life is full of unexpected dangers. The ability to tell your dog to *come*, *sit*, or *down* and know that he will immediately obey could mean the difference between life and death.

The precautions

If your dog’s obedience is unpredictable, then it isn’t obedience. It just means that some of the time he chooses to do what you want because there is nothing else he wants to do instead. Spend at least 15 minutes a day (ideally, several times a day) practicing the basic commands of *sit*, *come*, *down*, *stay*, and *heel* in a dedicated training session.

Practice in different locations with different distractions, such as your home, the park, or when you are out in the neighborhood.

Expect obedience at all times and always correct disobedience. Don’t give a command unless you are prepared to follow up. Until your dog is reliably and consistently obedient, keep his training collar and leash on, even when you are not formally training. Always be ready to correct disobedience. Don’t take the chance that you will be unprepared if your dog disobeys a command. When it comes to obedience—or lack thereof—err on the side of caution!

Greeting Other Dogs

If you have a friendly, outgoing dog, you may welcome meeting other dogs when you are out and about. Unfortunately, you cannot predict how other dogs will respond to your dog. Every encounter with another dog has the potential to be the beginning of a wonderful friendship or an outburst of animosity. When it comes to greeting strange dogs while you are out and about—don't. Even if your dog is friendly, calm, and well-behaved, the other dog may be aggressive, fearful, or out of control.

The risks

- Even if you ask before approaching, another owner could minimize his or her dog's behavior or temperament problems, which puts you and your dog at risk for injury.
- Some dogs that are normally friendly experience leash frustration or leash aggression and could react poorly when forced to meet another dog while on a leash.
- Your dog could not only be injured, but potentially exposed to infection. You have no way of knowing when meeting a strange dog whether the other dog's health is good and immunizations are up to date.

The precautions

Choose friends and playmates for your dogs among the dogs of people you know and trust. When you first introduce your dog to a friend's dog, walk together before allowing the dogs to play together. This allows the dogs to become accustomed to one another. In addition, walking relaxes the dogs and makes them less reactive.

In general, avoid dog parks. Dog parks are just crowds of dogs you don't know. Furthermore, any problem between two dogs in a dog park can quickly escalate into a pack fight among many dogs. Instead, arrange play dates with dogs and owners you know and trust. When it comes to greeting and interacting with other dogs, always err on the side of caution.

Destructive Behavior

Adult dogs may chew, scratch, dig obsessively or engage in other destructive behaviors for a variety of reasons, including boredom, frustration, and anxiety. With these kinds of destructive behaviors, you can usually predict when and why your dog will chew, so you take precautions. In young dogs, however, chewing is part of growing up and like all “phases” it doesn’t disappear all at once. Your pup may be fine one day and “Doggie Destructo” the next day. In other words, a young dog is unpredictable.

The risks

- The chewed stuffing from bedding or toys can cause obstructions in the intestines.
- Splinters or shards from wood, glass, or plastic can injure your dog’s paws, mouth, or digestive tract. If swallowed, a broken piece of wood, glass, or plastic can be deadly.
- Even if your dog miraculously escapes injury, allowing destructive behavior in the chewing phase will set your dog up to develop bad habits that last a lifetime.

The precautions

Don’t be in a rush to give your young dog the run of the house when you are not at home. If your dog has been crate trained, he does not view the crate as a punishment so I recommend crating him when he is at home alone. Hold off on putting a bed in the crate until you are certain your dog will not chew it up.

Unfortunately, I find that people often take chances before their young dogs are finished with the chewing phase. The fact is, it simply takes a while for some dogs to outgrow destructive behavior; it is up to you to balance his training, mental growth, and maturity to decide if his being left loose and alone is a wise decision. What’s my advice? Err on the side of caution.

Conclusion

Although I often caution clients that they should not treat their dogs like children—there is one important parallel between children and dogs: You are 100% responsible for their safety and well-being. Don't let wishful thinking outweigh the need for caution. You may have always dreamed of hiking with your dog—but if you hike with him off leash before you are sure he will come when called, then you risk losing him forever. A dog that comes “most of the time” is not safe off leash. Maybe you don't want to crate your dog because you envision him greeting you at the door at the end of the day—but if you leave him loose before he is mature enough to be trusted, you risk being greeted by destruction and disaster.

The bottom line is this: Never test your dog unless you are 100% sure of the outcome. Dogs need consistency and time: time to mature, time to grow and time to learn. Don't push your dog before you are 100% sure of his or her response. If you cannot predict the outcome with certainty, don't roll the dice. If your dog fails the test, at the very least you will undermine his training and extend the learning curve. Worse yet, you could put your dog's health or safety at risk. For the sake of your dog's well-being and the sake of your own sanity, always err on the side of caution!

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, championships, and honors 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, making Fyte the youngest qualifying dog in the history of this worldwide competition. Beth also took the Vice-championship with Fyte at the 2015 US Schutzhund Clubs of American National Championships.

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*, *The Blacklist*, *Billions*, and *Gotham*.

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