

Dog Training Advice from My Parents

Beth Bradley

Dog Trainer/Behaviorist

(201) 247-8472 www.dog-trainer.biz

I grew up in the 70's. We rode in the car without seatbelts and we rode our bikes without helmets. It was a different time with different rules. However, in my family at least, the rules we did have were non-negotiable.

My parents were strict; they had to be to maintain order in a house of energetic kids with a knack for finding trouble. When I or one of my siblings (OK, it was usually me) showed signs of disregarding the rules, my folks had a few key phrases guaranteed to get us (me) back in line. Although it's been years since I've heard one of their infamous phrases, and the wording may sound "old school" today, the intent and meaning of their words reflect some basic principles of discipline and training. And although I usually advise against treating our dogs like children, my parent's words hold some basic truths that apply to both kids and dogs.

"Don't make me get out of this chair."

This was a famous phrase around our house. We all knew what it meant. We had been told what to do. Once. We were expected to do it. Of course, being kids, we sometimes tested the boundaries of my father's patience. The roughhousing—or whatever other misbehavior we were engaged in—might continue until he had had enough and got out of his chair to put a stop to it. We learned early that it was better for all concerned if we didn't push it to that point. Looking back, I realize that my dad rarely had to get out of his chair because we knew what his words meant. *I told you once, if you make me repeat myself again, you are in for it.*

Your dog will, on occasion, test your limits. Your job is to ensure that he realizes that testing your limits has unpleasant consequences. Give a command once. If you have practiced this command and your dog knows it, correct for disobedience. If you repeat the command without correction and give your dog multiple chances, he will learn to ignore the first time you give a command. However, if you consistently follow through and correct disobedience to the first command, you will find your dog far less inclined to make you "get out of your chair."

If you come home sick from school again, I'm going to kill you.

My mother actually only said this to me once, but I remembered it forever. After a misguided attempt to get sent home from school by pretending to be sick, I learned that my mother was not as easily fooled as my teachers. (Or maybe they just figured they should let her deal with me.) I forget what symptoms I feigned, but I do remember that I anticipated watching cartoons from the comfort of the couch while my mother brought me snacks and devoted her day to ensuring I was comfortable. Ha! I knew my plan had failed the minute I got in the car when she came to pick me up. The look on her face told me immediately that she was not falling for my fake illness. And then, in a tone of voice that reached deep into my soul, she said, "If you ever come home sick from school again I will kill you." Now, I may have been a faker, but I wasn't an idiot. I knew she wouldn't actually end my life. (At least I was pretty sure. . .) But her hyperbole left no room for misinterpretation. What I had done was unacceptable and carried serious consequences. I had no doubt that if I tried this trick again, the punishment would be severe. I

believed this because disobedience always had severe consequences. Did I think my mother didn't love me? Of course not. I believed without question that my mother loved me. But I also believed without question that she didn't put up with disobedience---ever.

Your dog must believe that you will correct him significantly for disobedience. Your correction of any misbehavior should be significant enough to stop the misbehavior and make an impression. If the behavior continues, or is repeated soon after, you did not make a strong enough impression on your dog. Don't find reasons to sometimes let your dog slide. Nervous, distracted, mad that you left him, happy you are home. . . the list goes on and on. Your dog needs to truly believe that regardless of external circumstances, all disobedience has consequences. He will still believe you love him. But he must also believe that you do not put up with disobedience.

Because I said so.

We've all heard this one. It is the final resort of parents everywhere when faced with the interminable question "Why?" As kids, we found it frustrating that our parents would not always explain their reasons to our satisfaction. And yet, we accepted their right to shut the conversation down. When they said, "Because I said so," we grumbled and pouted, but we stopped asking questions and did as we were told. We understood the hierarchy: They made the decisions; we abided by them—even when we thought they were stupid. It is only as adults looking back that we understand that their frustrating, incomprehensible decisions usually made sense.

Your dog needs you to be his leader and make decisions he may not understand. He should never be evaluating his options to determine whether your command makes sense in the moment. Yes, chasing a squirrel is fun. But even though you don't stop to explain that you are worried about cars, or that you have to get to work, or that you want to avoid the carnage of the squirrel getting caught—your dog must still come when called. Your dog must be obedient to you even when he or she has other ideas. Why? Because you said so.

Nothing, because I gave you life!

My siblings and I did not get paid for doing household chores. If one of us were bold enough to ask what the financial reward would be for doing some extra task, the answer was always the same: "Nothing, because I gave you life!" Our parents made clear that any contribution we made to the smooth running of our household had been more than balanced out by the fact that they gave us life, put a roof over our heads, and fed us. They didn't take this stand solely to avoid paying us. They just didn't want us to feel entitled. They wanted us to do our part because it was the right thing to do, not because we expected payment. They knew that when they brought us into the world, they had signed on for a lifetime of responsibility that went far beyond taking care of the bills and putting meals on the table. They took seriously their responsibility to teach us important life lessons as well, so that we could grow into healthy, secure, and socially acceptable adults.

If you need to offer food to get your dog to obey a command, then your dog is not really obedient. If he feels entitled to a treat each and every time he does what you say, he will be disappointed and uncooperative when the treats are not forthcoming. Yes, you can and should

intermittently *reward* with treats, but once a command is learned, you should not *bribe* with treats. Ultimately, your dog should be obedient to you because you are his Alpha. He should look to you for direction, and his greatest reward should be your approval. Although you did not technically give your dog life, when you took him into your home you accepted the responsibility of the Alpha. You committed not just to feeding him and giving him a place to live, but also to ensuring that he is physically and mentally healthy, secure, well adjusted, and socially acceptable. For better or worse, dogs live in a human world. Your dog relies on you to be the leader so he can navigate this world with confidence.

Conclusion

Who would have thought I would be recalling my parents' phrases when training dogs! Although I often warn people against treating their dogs like children, I do find that these "greatest hits" from my parents contain underlying truths that are appropriate for both kids and dogs. But since I'm a dog trainer—I'll state it in dog terms.

- Your dog needs to know that disobedience always has consequences.
- Your dog needs to believe that you will correct every instance of disobedience. You instill this belief by giving consistent correction that is significant enough to make an impression.
- Someone has to be in charge. It's you. Your dog doesn't need to know why you make your decisions, only that he needs to obey them.
- You have a responsibility to be a leader your dog can have confidence in.

I think both kids and dogs of 2020 could use a little 70's training from the parents back then. Because underneath the discipline is the most basic principle of all—sometimes we show our love by teaching those in our care the hard lessons they need so they can be safe, confident, and welcome in society.