

How Old Is Too Old For a Dog To Learn

Two questions that I get asked most often and usually in the same breath are "is my dog too old to be trained?", and, "what do you think of Cesar Milan (the author of several books and star of his own show on Cable Television)?" To you, these are two separate questions, but both questions can be answered using almost the same context.

Is my dog too old to learn?

No, I think any dog can be trained, no matter the age, breed or temperament. Dogs are followers. Man domesticated the dog because man needed a friend, and dogs allowed themselves to be domesticated because they needed a pack leader. When I am re-training or doing behavior modification with a 'problem dog', I have to look beyond the dog and look at the family and household. Most problems are perpetuated by the humans in the house whether they realize it or not. Once I show the owners how they are allowing this behavior to take place, and show them how to institute the rules as I have explained, their dogs do not revert to the 'problem behavior'. Problem solved!

But, every so often, I come across a person who is in denial of their part in the dog's behavior or worse yet, refuses to change how they handle their dog or treat their dog so a change can come about. This is the same person who will go through 4 and 5 trainers until they find the answers they want to hear. But, please realize, the answers never changed, the only thing that changed was the manner in which the solution was presented, hence, their new found wonderful 'behaviorist'.

In order for the dog's behavior to change, the owners must change how they handle and lead their dog. The owners sometimes do not want to take on the role as Alpha or Pack leader; do not want to set rules or do not want to believe that their dog is 'acting like a dog'. In plain English, most times it is the owners that are refusing to change, and hence the dog's behavior never changes.

Dogs do what is good for them, what satisfies their needs at that time. That may mean obeying you or not, dogs do what is good for them at that moment. It is up to the owner to establish him or herself as Pack Leader and not to allow unacceptable behavior. When the owner acts as the Pack Leader the dog realizes (a) obedience is not an option and (b) there is a consequence to acting 'outside of the pack rules'.

Cesar Milan

And, yes, I think the verbal information Cesar Milan gives on his program is great. Cesar makes training seem very easy, it is not. That is my problem with his

program. It is not the sound that Cesar makes or the way he touches a dog; neither you nor I can duplicate the way in which Cesar trains. Training a dog may be easy for Cesar and for me, because we are professional and natural born dog leaders. But training a dog is not easy and does not come naturally or easily to many people.

I'm sure there is a lot of ground work that is done that we as television viewers do not see. But what I do like about Cesar's show is that if you really listen to his answers, most dog behavioral problems are not about re-training the dog, but re-training the owner or human in the manner in which they live or handle their dog; that is the difficult part!

Cesar spends a great part of his show listening to the owner's problems. He then explains to these owners that they are allowing their dog to exhibit this undesirable behavior by treating their dog as a human and not as a dog. And of course they must establish themselves as the Alpha.

Teach your dog to be a follower

The only way behavioral problems go away is if you teach your dog that his behavior is unacceptable and he must follow your lead as Alpha. A dog does not want to be pack leader; that is a stressful role for a dog. He must protect and make decisions in a world which he doesn't understand the language, all but a few words anyway!

That is like me asking you to take over as leader in a different country in which you do not understand the customs or the language. This stress that the owner gives the dog creates the improper behavior and the dog just reacts the way he knows how, like a dog. Then he gets punished for acting like a dog! It's a 'lose- lose' situation for the dog.

It is up to you, the reasoning human, to take over the leadership position, change the way in which you handle your dog, set some rules and boundaries and be prepared to enforce the rules should they be broken by your beloved pet. Now your dog can go back to being a dog, a role he understands! He wants to be a follower, which should be his role in your home. Once you establish clear and consistent rules for your dog to follow, his behavior will change. But the moment you allow misbehavior or a breaking of the rules, you will see your dog's unwanted behavior rear its ugly head again.

Conclusion

Yes, any dog can be trained and re-trained at any age, but are you the owner willing to make changes in your life and in the life of your dog so the training has a chance of success? I never guarantee the dog will not go back to the problem behavior because, frankly, I am never convinced the humans in the household are up to the challenge of the change in themselves. No one can guarantee their training methods will work because it is not the dog we are worried about, it is the change in the

human that we are worried about. Unfortunately, I have met very few humans who make me confident that they are up to the challenge of changing themselves.

If you are not willing to make a change in yourself and maybe your lifestyle, your dog's behavior is not going to change. If you are willing to change and realize maybe you have to alter your lifestyle a little bit, yes, any behavior can be trained out of your dog. No, the change will not happen overnight but once you acknowledge the changes that need to be made and you stop creating excuses for why the training will not work, you will see a huge difference in your dog and the life which you live with your dog will be dramatically changed for the better.

I also encourage the owners to continue to participate in training lessons, so I can see what they are doing wrong and how to handle their dogs. I don't charge for more lessons and the owners can come as often as they like. I want the training and my hard work to stick!

Daycare Training

We also have daycare at our training school. But our school is different in that we encourage our clients to come to class here. It doesn't matter how much we work and train your dog, your dog is only going to obey and listen to you if you are Alpha and you enforce the rules. At our daycare we make sure the dogs get enough exercise so when it comes time for training, they are not frustrated by lack of exercise. But, you must still work with your dog at home. We are just helping you out by teaching and practicing, being Alpha and getting your dog to obey you is going to take practice on your part.

Our Job vs. the Owners Job

Our job either with daycare or campus training is to make sure the dog understands the commands and understands that there is no choice, he must obey when commanded. We make your day a little easier by working with your dog and figuring out how we must 'tweak' certain exercises so your dog understands them. Your job is to work with him every day, put him through his paces, we have done the hard part of teaching, and your job is now just repetition and enforcing the rules. You must be Pack Leader and the only way to be your dog's Alpha is to train with him every day and correct when needed.

Conclusion:

Sending your dog away for training is not a bad idea, especially if you do not have the time for the hard part of the training which is the teaching phase. The only time it becomes a waste of money is when owners think they never have to make the dog listen or obey and never have to put him or her through his paces. Each dog needs to be trained daily, at least for 20 minutes to ½ hour; and a walk in the neighborhood does not count as training. The training can be as structured as participating in a class or as lenient as training in your home, but you must run him through his commands every day. The daily training is going to make your dog understand that you are Alpha and he must always obey.

Hiking and Walks:

But the best form of exercise for your dog is a walk. The walk is so important on many levels. First, the walk teaches the dog that you are Alpha. When you are walking a puppy, most lag behind, so you are teaching them by your body language that they are not Alpha and that they should be walking behind you. As they get older, they are used to this being their position so this is easily taught by using the command 'heel'. Second, the walk stimulates a dog's mind. The dog is taking in so many scents and sights that not only will the walk physically tire your dog but he will also be mentally tired from thinking about the smells and sights he took in on the walk. Third, the walk is a way to socialize your dog with people and other dogs. The walk socializes them.

The walk teaches the dog that there are other people out there in the universe and that they have to adjust to new people all of the time. The dog has to adjust to and accept the new faces of both people and dogs that they are meeting on this walk.

Many dogs are frustrated when on the leash because they can't do what they want to do and see whom they want to see so they become aggressive; this is called leash frustration. If the dog is walked infrequently, everything is exciting and new, and if you do not let him investigate, he becomes frustrated. But a dog that is walked often usually doesn't have this frustration because it is not novel. Dogs that are walked often are not frazzled by new people, new dogs, loud sounds or chaos on the streets. Once your dog is walking nicely, you can always add bicycling, roller blading and skate boarding to your dog's exercise program. If both you and your dog have a need for speed, this will take your exercise program to a new and exciting level!

Conclusion:

Exercise goes hand in hand with discipline in rearing a well-mannered dog. But, like any new exercise program, start out slowly. If your dog is older, have your Veterinarian do a complete check up before you attempt any strenuous exercise program. Dogs need to warm up just like us humans, so a walk before chasing the ball may be a great idea for your dog. And don't forget two important things: #1: doggie clean up bags: exercise gets everything moving; even your dog's bowels! Even if he went at home before you left, the excitement is going to bring on another bowel movement so be sure to have a couple of bags on hand. And the second important thing to bring with you on a walk: Water. Both you and your dog are going to get thirsty, so be sure to have plenty of water for both of you. Bring a back pack with you to carry a bowel and water bottles or buy a back pack for your dog so he can carry his own water and bowl. Sometimes, even hiking in the woods, water is not an easy find and since your dog can't sweat, he is going to need water to keep him cool.