

Control Exercises

by Jenny Turner

Many people bring their dogs to training in the hope of teaching their dogs basic human manners. Sit, drop and stay only go a certain distance to building good doggie behaviour.

This fact sheet should address some other situations that you'll find in the home, which will go a long way to gaining control over your pup without force. Done early, this will set up a trusting, respectful relationship between you and your dog.

Some people may tell you that your dog is being dominant. I'd be hesitant to diagnose dominance in a puppy or adolescent dog. Just like a child or teenager, a young dog becomes brave and is willing to test what they can get away with, to establish their rank in your family "pack".

This is not dominance, it's a natural technique to determine their status. As much as we'd all love to be equal, dog societies don't work that way. Each member has a certain order in the pack, so you need to be the "top dog" (alpha), to have control. I would still recommend obedience classes until your dog has matured into an adult. This doesn't just mean sexual maturity or growth maturity, you will see the turning point where your dog stops acting like a puppy. It is not until this time that their behaviour will become consistent.

Even if your mature dog is truly showing signs of dominance, these exercises below will go a long way to establishing yourself as the alpha by showing your dog that you control its food, toys, behaviour and environment. These are some control exercises to start with. 1. food bowl, 2. leaving the house, 3 leaving the car.

1. Food bowl – when we have the dog's food bowl, we have the dog's full attention. Use this opportunity right before mealtime to practice control and obedience. Carry the bowl to the laundry (or usual feed spot), if the dog jumps on you, turn around, put the food bowl back in the kitchen and go and sit in the lounge room. this is called negative punishment – removing something that the dog wants as a consequence of doing something wrong. After 3 minutes, repeat. Ask her to sit or drop. Tell her stay, lower the bowl, if she sticks her head in it, take it away, repeat until she sits while the bowl is lowered to the floor. Then give her the release word to indicate that she can eat, like "OK" or "dinner". Raise the bar each day so that eventually the dog will sit automatically, then you can put the food bowl down and even leave the room for a minute or so without the dog eating the food until you give the command.

2. Leaving the house – when you're taking her for a walk, you get out the lead and she goes nuts, right? Go to the front door, ask her to sit, put the lead on, ask her to stay, start to open the door, if she stands up, close the door and ask her to sit. Repeat until you can get her to sit while you open the door fully, then give her your release word – like "let's go" or "OK".
3. Leaving the car – same as above, although this one is **extremely** important for the dogs safety, because you don't want her jumping straight out of the car as soon as you open the door, and getting hit by a passing car. When you arrive at your destination, wind her window down so you can get an arm in. If she's in a harness, it will make your job easier, but even though the harness will stop her from jumping out, I'd still teach this command just in case the day comes when she hasn't got the harness on. Get yourself out of the car and ask her to sit, tell her stay, stick your hand in the window and start to open the door, if she gets up, hold her back so her paws don't get caught in the door and close the door. Repeat until you can open the door and put her lead on without her trying to push past you to jump out.

When teaching any of these control exercises, you can use a marker word to indicate to her that she's done something wrong – like "ah'ah" or "nup", but I wouldn't be forceful and yell "NO". Remember, dogs only do what is natural to them, they're not being disobedient, only following their instincts. We're trying to teach human manners to a dog, so we need to be patient and teach them, not punish them. Any animal will learn 10 times faster when rewarded for doing the right thing, rather than being punished for doing the wrong thing. I definitely don't recommend smacking or yelling when the dog does something wrong, it can lead to aggression or can worsen an already aggressive dog. It also decreases the dog's trust in you – they're only doing what's natural, so they can't understand why you're yelling.

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