

**The Mannerly Dog**  
**A Mannerly Dog is Easy to Love**  
Pasadena, Texas

**THE MYSTERIES OF MULTI-DOG HOUSEHOLDS:  
EFFECTS ON DOG BEHAVIOR**

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*Guess which dog is the foster and which two are the resident dogs. At this moment, the foster dog is on the right, while the two dogs who have lived together or years are several feet apart.*

Arguably the most important component of an enjoyable household with multiple dogs is an individual relationship between each human and each dog in the home. This is created via private time with each dog, going for walks, training, playing games that particular dog enjoys, quiet time sharing affection, grooming, and other pleasant pastimes. It's challenging to uphold this relationship as more dogs or more people come into the picture, because there are multiple relationships to uphold.

Each dog has his or her strengths and weaknesses. Just like kids on a playground, some are bossy, some are shy, some just want to have fun, some want all the toys to themselves. Some will sleep anywhere, some want to have one special place; some like to run around and hunt in the yard, some don't really even want to go outside. Some are upset when you leave and others don't care whether you're there or not.

Left to their own devices, dogs in your home will form a social structure just like feral dogs out on the street do. The problem is that feral dogs have a component in their social structure that includes, "You should move to a place far from my area and never come close to me." We don't really want that kind of natural selection to occur in our homes, because we want to choose which dogs live there. Because we've taken that responsibility, we must facilitate every dog having his needs met – physically, emotionally, socially, and mentally – and remember, each dog's needs and desires are different.

Stress takes many faces. Under the pressure of stress, some dogs shut down and others appear "hyperactive." It's important to understand the signs and impacts of individual canine stress in a multi-dog household, particularly with rescue dogs because they are often stressed in the situation they are rescued from and will stay stressed if we don't work hard to reverse it.

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Sometimes we think other dogs will naturally relieve stress in newly rescued dogs when they are actually helping to create a more stressing situation.

Because the other dogs are not always helping a new dog de-stress, and in fact may not be allowing their current canine housemates to de-stress, it's best to take steps to make sure each dog has "enough" physical and emotional space to feel relaxed and comfortable. What is "enough?" It's different for every dog, to make things more difficult!

If we make sure to allow and even enforce "alone time" for each of our dogs for a while each day, we will be on a solid path toward meeting their needs for minimizing stress and as an added benefit, building their skill at being alone. Yes, that's a skill! Consider all the dogs we see with versions of separation distress, who cannot be alone without expressing fear or anxiety, often to extreme degrees, because they have never learned to alone and comfortable. Then consider all the dogs we see who just can't seem to calm themselves, ever. Each period of "alone time" gives all the dogs a chance to de-stress, through the physical act of chewing, or through going into a deep sleep during which they can really close their eyes and not worry whether another dog is going to walk up on them during their nap. Then, when it's time to hang out with the group again, everyone is fully refreshed, stress is at a minimum, and they're all ready to use their best interaction skills.

All dogs can't start by being completely alone, but we can build that skill in small steps; crating all the dogs for a short rest period, carefully providing a bit more space between them each time until they are in separate rooms, is just one possibility. Of course, "alone time" should be pleasantly anticipated by each dog. A soft bed to relax on, a stuffed Kong or highly valued bone or chewie that he only gets during this time, and a routine that begins with just a short rest time after some stimulating activity and builds to a longer period are key in developing a dog's comfort with this important skill.

Any new behavior you want all the dogs to do together should be taught to each individual dog first. If you want the group of dogs to stay back from the front door, you can create that behavior first with a single dog. Put all the dogs away for their rest period except for one. Place a piece of masking tape on the floor across an ideal visual breakpoint like a foyer doorway to mark where you want the dog to stop instead of coming all the way to the door. In the initial stages of training, use a baby gate if necessary. Simply toss a treat behind the dog so that he must turn away from the front door to get it off the floor. As soon as he turns back around toward you, toss another treat in the same place. Consider this a game: the object is to keep the dog behind the line for the entire training session of maybe 5 minutes, and each time you get him to turn away from the front door, you get a point! (He gets a treat!) The game can be very active; the dog could sit or lie down if he wanted to, but it's best if he's active and happily excited about the game. Doorbells and knocking usually excite dogs; we want him to learn that when he's excited he should turn away from the door and stay behind the line rather than rush the door and jump up on visitors, bolt out the door, or perform other such undesirable behaviors.

When each dog is beginning to understand what you want from him, practice with two dogs together. This will be challenging for you, but the dogs will get it very quickly if you concentrate on using the power of the tossed treats to communicate to the dogs what behaviors you like. With

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two dogs, toss the treats so that one dog goes a little left to get his and the other dog goes a little right; even long-term housemates can become aroused and fight over food. You will be pretty good at directing your throws after training each of your dogs individually! Add a third dog when you feel in control, and then a fourth, up to however many you have. You'll then want to go back to training one individual dog to do this behavior while you open and close the front door, and then while you ring the doorbell or knock.\* Practicing this behavior will make your household more peaceful and also provide some one-on-one activity time with each of your dogs for a while.

Walking a group of dogs, training the group in how to behave at the front door or in mealtime procedures, and just hanging around the house with all of them is important, too. Monitoring playtime to make sure everyone has fun and things don't get out of hand is important. If you have a safe place to do so, leash-free walks in the woods with the group are ideal because everyone has room to express himself and when you've built those individual relationships with each dog, they will all check in with you regularly so you know where they are. Do not feel like every dog has to get the same number of treat rewards throughout the day; make each treat you give be of value in communicating that you liked a particular behavior. Every dog can offer some behavior you can reward: not barking when he's a dog who typically barks his head off, sitting and looking up at you, dropping what he's doing to come across the room and greet you when you come into the room all deserve the communication, "Hey, I see you went to some trouble to do that, and I appreciate it. You can have a salary bonus (treat)."

Dog-to-dog interactions are secondary to your individual relationships with each of your dogs. We love to watch dogs play together, and it's ever so adorable when two of them curl up together to sleep, but behavior never remains the same; it's always growing and changing. Because we've chosen the dogs who live together with us in our homes, we are in charge of making sure everyone gets what he or she needs, and we must pay attention to their wordless communications to each other and to us. Things will change, sometimes daily. Two dogs sleeping together today may want to be apart tomorrow, and that's OK. We humans need our private time to develop ourselves as individuals and so do our dogs. Pay attention to the subtleties of playtime and dog interactions around the house and adjust as needed, and peace will reign.

*\*If a particular dog is very sensitive to doorbells and knocking, or to people coming to the door, you'll need to desensitize that dog to those triggers and counter-condition him to stay behind the line. He'll need more help to be comfortable with this behavior. We can cover that in a future article.*