

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

START AT THE BEGINNING WITH TRAINING

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“Advanced training is simply the precise application of the fundamentals.” That’s a Bailey-ism, one of the handful of dictums that Bob Bailey, my mentor, repeats as he teaches those who want to learn about animal behavior and training. It means many things; to highly successful trainers, it can be a reminder that they, too, must always start with the fundamentals in solving problems or in training a new dog. To beginners, it means you can’t skip steps in training, but must get the beginning stages right before moving on. To many trainers, it’s a reminder that any behavior, even if it appears very complex, can be broken down in analysis to a series of very simple behaviors – the fundamentals.

Fundamentals for the trainer include the ability to observe a dog’s behavior and see each individual part so that she can work to change them; the skill of making a plan for changing the behavior; the skill of reinforcing a behavior by feeding the dog a treat, opening the door for him to go out, starting a game or putting his leash on just at the right moment; and the patience, focus and commitment to do this repeatedly without getting bored. Some elementary organizational skills are helpful, like having treats available, knowing how to use a clicker and having it handy, being able to put your hands on a leash when you’re ready to train, things like that.

Fundamentals for the dog include being healthy and wanting something that a human can provide. It’s nice when the dog can take treats gently, without chomping the trainer’s hand, but that can be the first behavior you work on; you can always toss treats on the floor at first if necessary. In training, you must always begin wherever you need to begin. That’s another definition of using fundamentals: Don’t try to teach your dog to come to you from a block away when he’s barking at a squirrel if you can’t get him to come over to the couch from the kitchen when you call.

You have to be able to control the dog’s behavior in order to be able to control what he learns. He’s learning all the time. He’ll learn what you teach him if you make it easy and rewarding for him to do so. He’ll learn something you don’t like if it’s easy and rewarding for him to do so. Behavior grows in the direction it’s already moving, and it’s moving all the time. If a behavior is changing in a direction toward something you’re not going to like, it’d be best if you turned it in another direction – toward something you will like – because it will continue to change and grow. Behavior never stays the same.

Controlling a dog’s behavior can be as simple as putting your eyes on him. If you’re supervising his trips out to the back yard, you can see what he’s doing when he’s out there. Does he sniff around? Does he chase squirrels? Does he pee where the other dogs have peed? Does he dig? Does he bark at the neighbors, or at their dog? Does he chase the neighbor’s cat? Does

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he lunge and bark at passersby? Anything else? Whatever your dog does frequently, he's practicing and becoming better at, and that activity is becoming more and more ingrained in his skill set, very likely becoming a habit. Are you seeing a behavior you'd like to see more of or one you don't really like and would like to go away? Watching and learning what your dog is doing is Step 1.

Preventing a behavior you don't like is Step 2. In order to prevent some behaviors, it may be necessary to control your dog by putting a leash on him to keep him near you, confining him in a kennel or crate, putting up a baby gate, or simply being more observant and aware of his whereabouts and what he's up to if you can be diligent about that. We must control what the dog is doing if we want to control what he's learning because what he's doing is what he'll continue to do, do more frequently, and become better at. If you allow him to continue practicing the behavior you don't like, even if you're working very hard at teaching him a behavior you do like, you'll be getting in the way of your own training. The old behavior had a "head start" on the new behavior. Your dog may have been practicing the behavior you don't like for a long time; if he's a new foster dog or a newly adopted dog, you may not even know how long. You may not know what his history is, but when you see him doing a particular behavior often, you can surmise that he's got a background that includes this behavior being reinforced. That may mean he's received some reinforcing input from a previous owner, or it may mean that behavior makes him feel happy, relaxed or comfortable, gets the endorphins flowing, or is just plain fun – we call these "self-reinforcing behaviors," and they include barking, jumping, any physical activity, rolling on grass or carpet, and many more. They just make a dog feel good. So if you don't like a behavior and don't want it to be reinforced, it's best to just prevent it from occurring.

Once you have a plan for controlling your dog's behavior which includes prevention of the behavior you don't like as well as setting up situations in which it's easy for the behavior you do like to occur, all you need to do is get the behaviors you like to occur and reinforce them. Reinforcing the behaviors you want is Step 3. These will become your dog's new, growing habits. These behaviors will have room in your dog's life to develop and rewarding them will increase their frequency, so they'll soon begin occurring much more often than the behavior you didn't like. The old behavior will never be erased from your dog's memory banks, but it will seem to go away because you'll be seeing the new behavior more and more often. You may want someday to bring this old behavior back in a controlled fashion; you'll have the ability to do that since it never really goes away. If it's something you never want to come back, you need to be aware that it is still in your dog's bag of tricks, and continue to reinforce alternative behaviors, creating more and more alternatives for him to choose from and helping them to become strong habits in your dog's life.