

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

THE FOUNDATIONS OF GOOD BEHAVIOR IN A DOG

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In my mind, the goals for all dogs should include confidence, friendliness and an ability to relax in almost any situation. Clearly, any dog who is to become a working dog – a Service or Hearing Dog, a Search & Rescue Dog, a Police or Hazard Detection Dog – must possess these qualities. Dogs who compete in Obedience, Agility, or other dog sports need to have many of these qualities in order to perform well. Family pets, especially those who live with small children, are also expected to achieve these qualities at a high level in order for children to be safe around them. Is it realistic to think that every owner can reach these goals with every dog? No way. But we can visualize these goals as ideals to pursue, whether or not we ever get all the way there. At each step of working to achieve these goals, we'll be improving a dog's ability to cope with changes in his life.

Confidence: We help dogs achieve confidence when we show them that they have some control over what happens in their lives and that we are protecting their safety. Each time we teach a dog a trick or any behavior by using positive reinforcement, we teach him that by performing the target behavior, he is setting himself up to receive something he wants. When we give him what he wants, whether it be a treat or a game; the opportunity to go outside, come inside or get on the couch; or his meal; we show him that by his choice of behavior he is controlling whether he gets what he wants. When we prevent small children or ignorant adults from grabbing our dogs inappropriately or yanking on their leashes, we prevent our dogs from being in situations that scare them. The same occurs when we prevent other dog owners from letting their ill-behaved dogs bark and lunge at our dogs, keeping our dogs feeling safe and secure. Over time, our dogs learn that they need only look to us for protection and to see what choices they should make when new situations arise, resulting in bolstered confidence. Fearful behaviors and behaviors indicating our dogs are experiencing conflict will disappear as they learn these valuable lessons, including that when they display confident body postures, both people and dogs in their presence are likely to relax, lowering the level of arousal in the whole room. Thus, our dogs can actually help create a low-stress environment, reinforcing those behaviors that contribute to it.

Friendliness: What we're looking for here is a good mix of tolerance for all people and affection-seeking with some people. A dog doesn't have to love all people, but he needs to tolerate the presence of all people. He doesn't have to tolerate being abused by people, but he needs to tolerate their often clumsy attempts at interaction and the poking and prodding that's done in the name of grooming and medical care. He should sometimes approach some people and seek interaction in an appropriate way. While we're setting our dogs up for success in this area, we need to remember to protect him from some of the people who approach him with good intentions but poor social skills as discussed in the previous paragraph. Sometimes we can help to educate these folks so that when they meet another dog, they won't make the same mistakes!

The Ability to Relax in Almost Any Situation: We expect dogs to adapt to the situations we put them in. Right or wrong, we expect them to go where we want them to go and tolerate whatever conditions we expose them to. If dogs are nervous or stressed in a certain type of

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situation, they are likely to be nervous or stressed in others. In fact, dogs can become conditioned to the flow of stress hormones and other factors of the physiological state of being stressed such that they tend to respond to new situations by becoming stressed. This means that they may even start becoming stressed in situations in which they were formerly comfortable and relaxed. As a rule, a dog is relaxed if he's displaying confident body postures, behaving in a friendly manner, is comfortable enough to perform one of the behaviors he knows very well when asked and to eat a treat when he's given one. These are ways you can tell how relaxed your dog is in a given situation. Of course, there's a continuum of levels of being relaxed and comfortable, depending upon how your dog is feeling that day, how familiar the type of situation is to him, noise and excitement level, and other factors. Use your best judgment to objectively evaluate how your dog is doing with this quality.

Briefly, the foundation behaviors I recommend for every dog to help them achieve the highest levels they can of confidence, friendliness and relaxation include a good solid "sit," performed immediately when the cue word is given; a default "sit" to ask for what he wants; tolerance of being touched on every part of his body; and attentiveness to his owner. From this foundation, a dog can learn almost anything.