

## **Human Canine Symbiosis - What We Can Learn From Our Dogs**

It's well documented that dogs are thinking, emotional creatures with a capacity to learn – but is this learning a one way street? Hardly!

In my opinion people stand to learn many important life lessons from their dogs. In fact, if we stop to examine what dogs teach us, we'll soon realize we learn far more from them than they learn from us. My first dog Sahara changed my life and helped me create the person I am today. She and my youngest dog Leia continue to teach me about myself and life on a daily basis. I often say that Sahara is responsible for making me a dog trainer and Leia has made me a better one. They've both shown me how to be a better person. In fact, I strive to be more like my dogs everyday and I truly believe that's a righteous goal.

Dogs don't hate. They're not vengeful, spiteful, or self-defeating and they're not cynical. Dogs are honest, innocent and peaceful creatures. When their needs are met and they're treated humanely, dogs default to happiness and exude positive energy. Dogs are not obsessed with material possessions and they're not self absorbed. If given the opportunity and ideal conditions, dogs simply live in the moment and are glad to exist. I truly believe that's the key to a peaceful existence for all living things on our planet. It's humans who make life more complicated than it has to be and many do the same with dog training.

When we nurture a bond based on trust and respect by meeting our dog's basic needs as well as utilizing positive methods to teach them, we can achieve a symbiotic relationship with our dogs. In fact, it's my belief that we need dogs much more than they need us.

It's been proven that people who live with dogs enjoy lower levels of stress and experience better overall health than people who do not. How often have you come home stressed out, your dog greets you and everything melts away as it draws you into the moment? Dogs always live in the here and now and they can teach us to do the same if we take the time to pay attention. Being right here, right now is the best feeling in the world – ask your dog!

Humans often impose a hectic, complicated lifestyle upon themselves and their dogs – a lifestyle that includes conflict and tension which directly translates to anxiety for all involved. Minimalism is bliss and dogs teach us that keeping it simple elicits a joyful, peaceful nature.

Dogs are not materialistic by nature; we're the ones who create the things we buy for them. My dogs enjoy greater happiness when I simply spend quality time playing with them. What makes a toy or any resource so appealing is that it leads to playtime with either another dog or the handler – much more significant resources to most dogs than any toy or object. If the dog or handler is removed, a dog will eventually if not immediately become bored and stop playing with the toy. However, if the toy is removed and a dog or handler continues playing with the dog, the dog is still happy and focused, if not happier and more focused on the play itself – and will generally play as long as the other dog or handler does.

For dogs, being around the people they love and respect is true happiness. Dogs teach us that real joy is not achieved through the accumulation of material possessions; in fact, this type of hoarding is almost always a sign of underlying discontent and can manifest into a full blown obsession.

The following circumstances are quite common: The dog grabs one of the handler's possessions and is asked to drop the object. The dog decides to hold onto it and the handler repeats the cue. Still no drop and the cues are repeated again and again – only to receive a wagging tail and wiggly butt as a response from the dog. The handler's frustration rises and so does his or her voice as they move toward the dog to physically remove the object. The dog playfully and/or anxiously runs away and the handler continues to pursue the dog as everyone's frustration and anxiety climbs another notch. The dog continues to play the "keep away" game as the handler's frustration morphs into anger. A correction is administered and the dog is frightened into dropping the object. The dog slinks away, body lowered, eyes wide, and tail tucked. What did the handler just teach the dog? Certainly not a

reliable cue – instead, the handler trained the dog that “drop it” means to play “keep away” and also humans can be frightening and unpredictable. This course of action is not dog training – it is essentially a break down of training and handler self control.

Training a dog requires patience, consistency and most importantly self control. When a dog ignores the cue, the handler can turn around, cross his or her arms, count steamboats until calmed while ignoring the dog – this requires self control. The handler can then repeat the cue and if the dog still does not comply – repeat the process, especially if the handler feels frustration rising again. One strategy would be to get a more enticing resource, show it to the dog and ask it to drop the object. If the dog decides that the handler’s resource is better than the one it has, it will drop the object and the handler can reward the dog with the new resource. This requires forethought and patience.

In the second scenario, self control was exercised and there was no frustration for the dog or handler. After calmly troubleshooting the problem, the handler can put the resource of higher value away, retrieve another resource and practice repetitions of “take it, drop it and leave it” to reinforce the correct response to each cue. If an incorrect response happens again, the handler can simply repeat the process. This requires consistency and it all begins with handler self control.

Think of it as a human training equation. Self Control + Patience + Consistency = Reward or reliable responses to cues. How can we expect our dogs to exhibit self control if we don’t?

So if we let them, dogs can teach us about self control, patience and consistency – lessons that are extremely valuable and skills that are transferable to all aspects of our lives including human interactions.

Dogs never lie. They’re often misunderstood but are truthful 100% of the time. In the above example, when the game is on – the dog has a loose body and wagging tail indicating that it’s very much enjoying itself. As the handler’s frustration begins to rise, the dog is likely to show subtle signs of stress and anxiety that many are oblivious to. Subsequent to the punishment, the dog communicates fear. Dogs teach us that honesty should be across the board and there is no room in our lives for malice, lies or deceit, especially with those we claim to respect, love and trust.

Using positive methods with dogs accomplishes much more than just training. It nurtures an incredible human-canine symbiotic bond where trust, respect, learning and positive energy are exchanged and flow back and forth in a continual feedback loop. Dogs are not capable of learning our language in the way we can learn theirs – but if you educate yourself on canine language, you’ll have a far greater empathy for them and the lessons you’ll learn from your dog will be invaluable.

Challenge yourself to be more like your dog and apply the lessons you learn across all aspects of your life. Love and embrace your dog’s individualism and create behaviours you want with thoughtful, humane shaping. Likewise, you should love yourself for who you are, simplify your life and reshape elements of yourself and your life that are worthy of change. When the lines become blurred and you’re feeling lost, look to your dog as a shining example of a simpler, happier, honest way of life.

Positive shouldn’t just mean what we do with our dogs; it should be who we are.  
Happy shaping – both human and canine!

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