

Spoiled dog?... ask a Trainer

By Nan Arthur, CDDBC, CPDT, KPACTP

Dear Trainer,

A friend of mine insists that my dog is spoiled and is going to try to dominate me if I continue treating her like my “baby.” My dog sleeps with me and I sometimes give her “people” food, but she is really pretty well behaved in my opinion. My dog is a 2-year-old terrier mix and her only problems, (in my opinion) are jumping on people when they come over and getting wild when I put her leash on her because she is so excited. I just think my dog is excited when we have visitors or are going for a walk, not spoiled, but I’ll leave it up to you to inform me if she is.

Signed,

Excited or Spoiled

Dear Excited,

Well, if the definition of a spoiled dog is one that sleeps in bed with the pet parents, or is allowed people food, then count my dogs in that category since my dogs are allowed on furniture and I regularly cook for my dogs! Allowing dogs to share our space and the food that we eat is not indicative of being spoiled, not in the real sense of the word. Having a companion animal should be about companionship and, while some people’s definition is different from others, I believe humans and dogs do pretty well sharing each other’s world.

On the other hand, I consider dogs “overly indulged, or spoiled” when the dog has control of the desired resources in his or her world. In other words, when dogs take their place on the furniture and growl or snap when asked to get down, dogs that beg at the table when people are eating, dogs that demand to be petted, or dogs that drops the ball into a lap a 100 times over-- these clearly fall into the category of a “spoiled” dog. Of course, these are just a few of the categories that would fall into the “spoiled” area, but pretty much anything that damages the relationship between the dog and the human would fall into this group.

What’s in a name?

I think there is some room for “spoiling,” and, in fact, I believe that dogs should get just about everything they want, just in ways that works for us humans. It is possible to live in harmony with our dogs when we recognize that they have needs and wants that are easily satisfied, without a power struggle over possessions.

With that in mind, it is important to consider that dogs are not “out to rule our homes” or “dominate” us, as suggested by some people and even trainers. Those are very old theories based on wolf studies done in the 1940’s, which the experts agree produced erroneous results because of the way the studies were conducted.

What we do know, is dogs do what works for them to obtain and retain the things they want or need to feel contented or safe. It has nothing to do with dominating or even pleasing us humans; it has everything to do with pleasing the dog.

Rather than putting a title on your dog's behavior, I prefer to explain that behavior is just behavior, not good or bad, simply behavior that dogs have learned works to get the things they want in life. Dogs are simple in terms of why they do what they do—when a dog repeats a behavior, there is a payoff of some sort, or they wouldn't bother to use that behavior again. The payoff can be attention from humans (even when you are angry, for some dogs *that* attention is better than none), they get to keep their comfy spot on the couch, they get distance from something that bothers them, or they get you to play ball over and over, to name a few.

Stop paying off

If you want your dog to stop a behavior that is annoying or dangerous, you first have to stop paying off for the behavior. Ask yourself, what am I “buying” with my attention, action or focus toward the behavior in question? In your case, your dog most likely gets attention for jumping all over people, (from you and the people) and gets to go for her walk, even after she goes wild when you put the leash on her. Both are big payoffs!

Note: For those working through more serious problems, it's essential to work with a qualified behavior and training consultant that uses only positive methods when dealing with fear or aggression issues.

Teaching polite manners

If you don't like something your dog is doing, you will need to put something in the unwanted behavior's place so your dog has a new focus for getting what she wants. Some people might suggest you ignore unwanted behaviors, but most dogs will escalate their behavior if said behavior has always worked, and now it doesn't. Ignoring the behavior does not give the dog the information of what you would prefer her to do in place of the old behavior, so you may not extinguish the behavior if your only tactic is to pay no attention to your dog.

Rather than simply ignoring your dog, begin to take opportunities to reward your dog for all the good behaviors she displays. Dogs can and do learn calm behaviors as quickly as they learn the wild and unwanted ones, so show your dog what you would like her to do by rewarding all calm behaviors. Also, teach your dog a fast sit at the door, absent of guests so she learns without all the excitement of people coming in that sitting at the front door is a good thing. Then slowly add reliable friends and family members that won't give her any attention if she is jumping, but will acknowledge her after you get her to sit. She will quickly learn that she still gets attention from your guests, but only if she sits.

You can also make an effort to reward all the natural calm behaviors your dog offers each day. You can do this by counting out 50-100 tiny (pea-sized) food rewards (you can use the food you are going to feed her in a bowl) and then reward your dog doing something calm, by quietly walking over and dropping a treat at her feet. This will encourage her to offer more calm behaviors.

A few things you can reward to promote calmness in your dog:

- Calmness when you bring the leash out—you don't have to put it on, just bring it out and watch for opportunities to reward any calmness (look at the other things on the list for ideas)
- Standing (four on the floor)
- Sitting
- Lying down
- Breathing
- Looking at you
- Looking away from a distraction
- Sniffing the ground (this is a calming behavior)
- A wagging tail
- Chewing on an appropriate chew toy
- The absence of any unwanted behavior (which may look like your dog is being rewarded for nothing, but just think about all the things your dog could be doing! You are rewarding your dog for choosing not to do something your might regret.)

So, is your dog “spoiled?” I would say no, but as you can see, she certainly can learn some manners that will not only help her be more calm and relaxed around your company, but make life easier for you as well.

Great question and good luck.

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