



LOVE & LEADERSHIP

There is no question that love is a wonderful thing to give our dogs, and giving it is great therapy for us humans as well. But dogs, need more than love from us. In order to be balanced, healthy and happy, they need leadership.



A leader in charge of walking her dog is a wonderful sight.

Isn't love enough?

We all love to spoil our dogs, and pit bull owners know what love junkies these dogs can be! But too much freedom, love at inappropriate times and a lack of structure can not only reinforce inappropriate behavior, it can make your dog feel insecure and anxious. If you don't show your dog leadership, she may feel she has to take charge. For example, you might be walking down your neighborhood street when your dog sees an unfamiliar dog. She barks and pulls forward, thinking, "Don't worry, I'll scare that strange dog away!"

Good leadership lets your dog know that all is well and that you are in control, in a positive way. This allows your dog to relax so that she can enjoy life and not worry about who is taking care of things. And a human in charge of her calm, relaxed pit bull is a lovely sight, one that can help change falsehoods about this wonderful breed.

Do You Need to Use Physical Force to Be a Leader?

We are not talking about physical force here. It is possible, and preferable, to establish leadership with your dog using positive methods. You don't have to use physical force, punishment or "alpha rolls" (Please don't do this with your dog. Many people have been seriously hurt doing it, and it's unnecessary.). In fact, all the talk in dog circles about being the "alpha" can be misleading. First of all, *ahem*, your dog *knows* that you're not a dog. Secondly, ask

yourself, does a human being really have a place in a dog pack trying to be an alpha dog? Nope, you just need to be a leader, you already are the holder of resources.

Control the resources The good news is that you don't have to act like a dog to establish leadership. You are already ahead of the game just by owning all of the resources. Use them to your advantage! Be the keeper of all good things. Treats! Walks! Meals! Games of fetch! The one who controls the resources, controls the dog. For example, before you give your dog a treat, ask her to perform a sit, down, shake or any other command you prefer. Does your dog jump up and down and spin in circles whenever you get the leash out? Have her sit at the door and wait. When you open the door, don't let her bowl you over as she shoves past you and drags you out the door. Proceed when you are ready. You don't want to have to explain those skinned knees at work, do you?

By the same token, don't let your dog demand affection. We've all experienced the "shovel-nose" tactic a dog will use when she wants to be petted! If your dog uses this tactic, ignore her. Decide when you want to give her affection, then ask her to sit or perform another command first. Make her work for her rewards. Mealtimes are another opportunity to show leadership. Before dinner, I have my four pit bulls perform a sit/stay and then look at me first, before their bowls are put down. I stand tall and I am not wishy-washy. They understand who controls the food, and what they have to do to get it.

Reward calm behavior

As you praise your dog, be sure to do it in a way that's calming. Don't use your high-pitched or squeaky voice, as it can quickly elevate her level of excitement.

Help your dog to practice staying calm in different situations.

This in turn can create a hyperactive dog who thinks bouncing, jumping and being anxious is the right way to be, because YOU are reinforcing that behavior. When you come home at night and your dog is jumping all over, wait until she's calm before even talking to her.

(This is the hard part for us humans, we love our greetings!) In a hyper-aroused state, she will not even hear the command to "sit". Your mission: WAIT until she is calm; THEN tell her to sit; THEN pet her. A leader controls all greetings in a calm, positive manner.



Ask your dog to work for treats and affection.



Help your dog to practice staying calm in different situations.

She will relax and feel secure knowing that you are in charge. Does this mean your dog won't feel loved? No. She'll feel more loved and secure! Dogs are pack animals and are wired to look forward and take comfort in being led. They aren't loners in making decisions. In fact, your relationship with your dog will improve and trust will develop, strengthening your bond. Think about it this way: you expect to have to work for your paycheck, and so does your dog. In fact, earning it brings her a sense of pride and accomplishment, and she will love you all the more for giving her that gift. *That's* love!

Marthina McClay, CPDT-KA

Don't ask, do tell! We've all heard or done this one before: when giving a command, we say something like, "Buffy, *siiiiit?*?" When you give a command, don't "ask" your dog to perform it, tell her. Say it as though you *know* she will perform the behavior. Then lighten your voice to praise her. Believe me, you won't hurt her feelings and she's not going to be thinking, "Gee, my owner sure is bossy!" She is actually going to be VERY happy to work for something she really loves, whether it's a treat, toys, going for a walk, fetch, dinner or even just praise and affection.

The gift of leadership

Remember, control the resources and use your thinking, not force, to get the behavior you want from your dog.