

Sticky Situations

There are some situations that can throw even the most experienced trainers. These “clashes with clients” can make us feel uncomfortable or angry, or leave us totally baffled as to how to respond. Some scenarios occur with enough regularity that I felt they deserved a section of their own.

Unrealistic Expectations

I had a hard time with this one when I first started doing in-home training. Picture this: Laura and Brad, owners of six-month-old Max the Lab, tell you they would like Max to hang out with them on the front lawn of their suburban home. You reply that sounds like a great way for Max to get socialization. They then clarify that Max would be off-leash and expected to stay on the small, unfenced square of grass. After all, Joe down the street has a dog who is left loose on the front lawn but never tries to leave. So what’s wrong with this picture? Well, Joe’s dog is a twelve-year-old Basset Hound, and Laura and Brad have unrealistic expectations.

Personally, I do not teach off-leash boundary training in busy suburban or urban areas, because I don’t believe it is ever 100% safe. (And even if I did, I would never expect a six month old puppy to be reliable.) Years ago, I had trouble putting my foot down with clients. Now I explain that no matter how well trained the dog, there will always be that stray cat, other dog or distraction across the road, which can be a very bad thing when presented in combination with an oncoming vehicle. Regardless of what the client’s unrealistic expectation involves, it is your job is to state politely but firmly that it is not going to happen. If you are having

It's Not the Dogs, It's the People!

a difficult time of it, hang in there. With experience comes confidence. It gets easier.

Clouded Perceptions

Closely related to unrealistic expectations, clouded perceptions involve the client not seeing the dog's behavior clearly. This can take many forms. Some clients are convinced their dog is "just plain bad" or "stubborn". They cannot get the dog to listen to them, so it must be "defiant". (This particular form of clouded perception also includes being anthropomorphic.) Others have rescued dogs and attribute everything the dog does to having been "abused". The fact is, plenty of rescued dogs were never abused; mostly, they were neglected and/or poorly socialized. But the kind person who took the dog in is now overly lax with the "poor thing," so the training is lax as well.

Whatever the clouded perception, you can certainly give a brief explanation of what the reality is—but talk alone is not likely to change the person's mind. It will not help to simply say, "Sarah, it's unlikely that Shadow has been hit and that's why he won't come when you call." Show, don't tell. Once you get Shadow running joyfully to you when called, it will be hard for Sarah to argue that he can not do it. Once the "stubborn" dog is doing better, it will become apparent the dog is not so stubborn after all. Be sure clients see the dog's success, and shape them gradually away from clouded perceptions.

If the perception is harmless and makes the owner feel better, you might want to keep quiet. While it is important to correct the perception that four-month-old Zara is nippy rather than aggressive, letting Rosie believe that Jax loves her more than he does her husband (despite indications to the contrary) is harmless.

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Better Late Than Never?

There will be latecomers in almost any group class. When I began teaching classes, if the class started at 7:00 p.m. and only five of seven students were present, I would wait another ten minutes for the last two to show. All that did was teach stragglers it was no big deal to show up late, as the nice instructor would wait and you wouldn't have missed a thing. Start your classes on time even if there is only one person there. Once everyone is present, make a big deal of thanking and rewarding those who showed up on time. Your ratio of on-time students to late ones will improve. Play a fun game at the beginning of class. Oh, too bad, the latecomers didn't get to play—and it looked like everyone was having so much fun. Darn, there were even prizes! Just as we do with dogs, ignore behavior you do not want and reward the heck out of behavior you do want.

Emotional Blackmail

Ooh. I hate this one! So does every trainer I know. You get a call from a person who sounds extremely distressed. There has been a horrendous problem with the dog for quite some time. Now the owner is at the end of the proverbial rope. “If you don't fix this dog,” the caller threatens, “it's going back to the shelter tomorrow.” This person, who has not done a thing to “fix the dog” all this time, is now demanding that you, a total stranger, take responsibility for turning the dog around. And not only that, the ultimatum specifies, you must do it right away—*or else*. This one really used to get me, and can still leave me with a bad feeling for days. Having come from a background of doing rescue work, my Inner Rescuer wants to spring forth and shout, “Hang on! I'll save you!”