

Living with a dog pack

Contributed by Barbara Brill
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A woman wrote who was distressed. She had six dogs and many other companion animals. After she'd let the indoors cats outdoors, one was killed by one of her many family dogs.

Xxxx, don't be too hard on yourself. It isn't helpful to harbor a sense of blame. As one who have loved and lived with many animals for lots of years, perhaps you didn't anticipate something. I'll try to explain.

You're calling your dogs a pack. When you have a pack of dogs, in a sense you're giving them permission to work out things on their own. They'll do that to the best of their abilities, but you may not like the decisions they make.

If you want to have some decision-making authority so that events with your dogs will transpire to your liking, then you need to devote some effort to carefully, well-thought-out management and training that will lead to the desired outcomes. It's okay to wish, but it's much better to make some definitive plans.

It seems likely to me that you didn't anticipate how a household management decision, that is: allowing indoor cats to enjoy the great outdoors, would lead to such dire consequences. But the dogs, obviously, had an entirely different view or perspective about the cats once the cats were no longer strictly indoor pets. That environmental change gave the dogs *permission* in a sense to take matters into their own paws. It seems that your dogs perceived the outdoor fenced area as their personal territory. Life there was a free-for-all, and in the minds of the dogs the cats were for chasing and taking down.

For that reason, my suggestion would be to begin right there within the outdoor fenced area and use it as a dog-training site. Help the dogs to comprehend your leadership of not only the house territory but your leadership of the fenced 'yard territory,' as well. You have a lot working for you; you may use those things to good advantage in a way that canines comprehend.

I'm speaking now about positive-reinforcement training. To learn more about it, please order Pat Miller's excellent book, "The Power of Positive Dog Training." It may be ordered online from <http://www.dogwise.com/>

Pat is a former President of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers, a very large membership organization. She is experienced, knowledgeable, and most of all she writes clearly and succinctly. She gives concrete examples which are easy to understand. And, perhaps most important of all, it's fun to follow her teaching methods.

Consider this now. You are the controller of all good things that dogs enjoy. You have control of the wonderful resources that dogs need, such as affection, attention, exercise, food, play times, good grooming, and lots of fun. You can use these things as natural rewards while teaching your dogs the behaviors you want them to exhibit.

It would be useful to write down a list of some of the behaviors your dogs exhibit now that you really like. Think about it. Which ones look up and make eye contact with you when you come within sight of them? Write that down. Which ones approach you happily, coming forward, ready for some physical greetings? Write that down. Which ones settle nicely inside when you wish to be calm and quiet, read or watch TV or talk on the phone? Write that down.

Which ones greet visitors eagerly, yet politely? Write that down. Which ones wait nicely while you're preparing dinner for them and then handing out food bowls? Write that down.

Will any of them walk politely on lead with you when you want to take them somewhere? If so, write that down. Will the dog stop walking when you halt? Will any of the dogs sit before you open the door to go out? Sit/wait before you open the car door to release them? Will any of the dogs settle down inside the house without bothering the others? Write that down, too.

By now, you may have quite a list of wonderful things that your dogs do that you enjoy. Notice that I've listed behaviors which are interactions with their human instead of interactions with one another? That's because I'd like to be able to help you take back a personal relationship with each dog, to help it relate to you individually.

Please pay much more attention to your dogs when they're doing what you like. Never take good behavior for granted. Instead, mark and reward it. Use food treats for rewards.

What to do about the behaviors you do not enjoy? Many of them will extinguish if the dogs find reasonable substitute behaviors are rewarded and reinforced.

But some behaviors that we don't like may be self-rewarding for the dogs. That's true. In that case, we take steps to prevent the behaviors we do not wish to reinforce. One of the really nifty things about this approach to dog training is that the dogs seem to comprehend the whole idea. They begin to voluntarily offer some behaviors much more than others.

For instance, when I get up from my chair in the family room and start to walk, my dog dashes ahead of me toward the door to my office, and then makes eye contact to check in with me to make certain that she had anticipated my new direction correctly. If so, she dashed into that room and hops into her doggie bed beside my computer. Why would she do such a thing? Because, very simply, that's a behavior which I have reinforced for her over time. Her behaviors today are an example that rewarding desirable behavior helps to increase the frequency of that behavior. There are zillions and zillions of such examples.

What I'm suggesting here is that you created your dog pack, and now you have the power within your grasp to create the dog pack that you truly want. Just start to make some lists of the behaviors you'd like from your dogs and reward them for those. We can help you to work out a plan for each one, so that you begin with helping them meet attainable objectives, take "baby steps," before you begin to raise the criteria for each behavior.

I don't think you need to give up on your dogs at all. And I'm hoping that many other folks will jump in with their suggestions, too.

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