

# Whole Dog Journal™



## Training Your Dog to Behave Around Guests

**A positive training program for promoting peaceful paws.**

By Pat Miller, CBCC–KA, CPDT–KA

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The elderly man’s voice quavered haltingly in my ear. “Whiskey is just too energetic for us. We have to keep him penned up in the kitchen, and when he’s outside he just bounces on the door. He already broke the glass once! How do we stop him from bouncing on the door?”

Whiskey was an 18–month–old Labrador Retriever, adopted three weeks prior from the local humane society, to a couple in their mid–70s. His new guardians were experienced dog owners and had owned Labradors before, but their last dog died a decade earlier, at the ripe old age of 14 years. It had been almost a quarter of a century since the well–meaning couple had managed an active young dog!

It was clear that they had made an ill–advised adoption choice when they brought home an adolescent Lab with an unknown history, who had clearly missed more than a few of his good manners lessons. Rather than being the loving companion they had envisioned, Whiskey was making this couple’s life miserable.

Unfortunately, their solution (banishing Whiskey for longer and longer periods of time to the backyard) was compounding the problem, making Whiskey even more lonely and hence even more overstimulated when he was finally granted time in their company. They would, they promised, bring him in the house once he calmed down, but the more time he spent outside, the less calm he got. The relationship was spiraling rapidly downward, with the wife insisting that Whiskey was beyond help, and threatening to take him to their veterinarian for euthanasia.



We hastily scheduled an appointment for a private consultation. I assured the couple that there was no need to rush Whiskey to the euthanasia table – the young dog’s behavior sounded pretty normal for an untrained adolescent Lab, and even if he wasn’t suitable for their home, there were other options available to him, such as Labrador Retriever Rescue, or one of the many government search dog programs.

A vigorous game of fetch with a tennis ball takes the edge off. Alison, Buster’s trainer, has him fetch until he returns at a normal trot. Now he’s ready for a training session.

Sadly, Whiskey’s is not an isolated case. A generation or two ago, Mom stayed in the home and taught the dog good manners while the rest of the family went off to work or school. Today, many family canines are latchkey dogs, left to their own devices all day, and family members are often too busy or too tired when they get home to spend the time necessary to properly train the dog. So, while it’s increasingly socially acceptable to spay and neuter, and many animal shelters are seeing fewer litters of unwanted puppies as a result, shelter kennels are often filled with out-of-control adolescents like Whiskey.

## **Clicker Training is Key to Behavior Management**

Whether you have a pup with normal puppy energy or an obstreperous teenager who has good manners lessons to catch up on, clicker training can be a magically effective and gentle way to convince a dog to calm down. No yelling, no physical punishment; just clicks and treats for any pause in the action.

That said, the biggest challenge with a “hyper” dog is that any praise or reward may cause her to begin bouncing off the walls again. It is nearly impossible to deliver a treat to an excitable dog while she is still in the act of being calm. By the time you get the treat to her mouth she is once again doing her Tasmanian devil act. She may well perceive the treat as a reward for her jumping jacks rather than for the sought-after calmness that occurred briefly several seconds before. Fortunately, this problem is not insurmountable.

Timing and consistency are key to successful training. If you give a reward to your dog more than a second or two after she exhibits the desired behavior, she will lose the connection, and may even come to believe she was rewarded for whatever she was doing at the moment you gave her the reward. However, once a dog has learned the connection between a reward marker (I recommend using the Click! of a clicker or a verbal “Yes!”) and a pending reward, your timing can be impeccable – an instant of calm elicits a Click!, and the treat can arrive several seconds later. An added advantage of the clicker is that once most dogs hear the Click!, they pause in anticipation of the coming morsel, drawing out the relatively calm behavior even longer.

## **Modifying Your Crazy Dog's Behavior**

Here’s how you can turn your Tasmanian Devil into a Serene Sally. Follow this simple program to help her get rid of excess energy, prevent her from being rewarded for out-of-control behavior, and consistently reward her for being calm.

## 1. Exercise Your Dog Thoroughly

The first element in an “all is calm” program is to provide your dog with lots of exercise. Wise dog trainers and owners know that a tired dog is a well-behaved dog. Often, when people think their dogs are at their worst, they are simply chock-full of energy, bursting to find an escape. Tug o’ war on your pants leg, donuts around the dining room table, and record high-jumps over the back of the sofa are just some of their outlets for that pent-up energy.

If this sounds like your dog, schedule at least three tongue-dragging sessions of fetch per day. Climb to the top of a hill or staircase and throw the ball down so she has to keep climbing back up to return it to you. Set up an obstacle course with lots of things to climb and jump over. Be careful not to send her into heat stroke, but definitely play until she is pooped. Keep the exercise breed-appropriate – an athletic Border Collie can handle lots more physical challenges than an English Bulldog.

Don’t think that a walk around the block will do it. A walk on leash, even a long one, is nothing but an exercise hors d’oeuvre for a young dog. You may be tired when you get home from the walk, but your dog is just getting warmed up! If no one in the family has time to give her adequate exercise, arrange for a dog walker to come by a couple of times a day and wear her out, or take her to doggie daycare as often as possible. Eight hours of romping with other dogs is guaranteed to take the wind out of her sails! (See [“Doggie Daycare Can Be A Wonderful Experience: But is it for Every Dog? \(/issues/13\\_11/features/Doggie-Daycare-For-Canine-Socialization\\_20127-1.html\)”](/issues/13_11/features/Doggie-Daycare-For-Canine-Socialization_20127-1.html))

## 2. Manage Your Dog Tightly

While wearing out your dog should be part of your regular routine, there are other changes you can make in order to manage her inappropriate behavior (see [“Relieving Separation Anxiety Symptoms \(/issues/4\\_8/features/5382-1.html\)”](/issues/4_8/features/5382-1.html), August 2001). Whiskey, the Labrador mentioned earlier, repeatedly bounced against his family’s sliding glass door because it was rewarding to him; it brought him the greatly coveted attention of his people when he did so, and when he succeeded in breaking the glass, it actually gave him access to indoors, where he wanted to be.

All living things repeat behaviors that are rewarding to them. Whiskey’s owners needed to find ways to reward him for good behavior, and prevent him from being rewarded for the unacceptable ones.

The management answer is to physically control your dog’s behavior through the judicious use of leashes, pens, crates, and tethers (see [“Tethered to Success \(/issues/4\\_4/features/5164-1.html\)”](/issues/4_4/features/5164-1.html), April 2001, and [“Crate Training Made Easy \(/issues/3\\_8/features/5135-1.html\)”](/issues/3_8/features/5135-1.html), August 2000). Use these management tools wisely to prevent your dog from rewarding herself with your attention (at times you do not want to give it to her).

## 3. With Clicker Training, Timing is Everything

As soon as you have laid the foundation with exercise and management, you can begin an effective clicker-training program. Don’t procrastinate; you can accomplish this on Day One of your “all is calm” program. Start by “charging the clicker” – officially known in behavior circles as “conditioning the reward marker.”

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Begin by clicking the clicker in your pocket, to avoid startling her with the sharp sound. Click! the clicker, feed your dog a treat. Click! and treat. Click! and treat. As she begins to associate the sound with the treat, bring it out of your pocket and click it in a more natural position at your side or your waist.

Your dog doesn't have to do anything special to get the Click! and treat, as long as she isn't doing something unacceptable, like jumping on you or chewing the corner of the coffee table. If necessary, use one of your management tools to keep her out of trouble while you Click! and treat. Most dogs catch on pretty quickly that the Click! means a treat is coming. When your dog's ears perk and her eyes brighten at the sound of the Click!, you know she's getting it. Now you can use your "charged" clicker for training.

The goal of clicker training is to get your dog to understand that she can make the Click! happen by offering certain behaviors – in this case, calm. At first, you can't wait for long, leisurely stretches of calm behavior to click; some families report that their dogs never stop whirling around like a tornado, at least, when people are paying attention to them! Instead, begin by giving your dog a Click! and treat just because all four feet are on the floor at the same instant. Be quick! You want her to understand that the behavior she got rewarded for was pausing with all four feet on the floor, so your timing needs to be sharp, and the Click! needs to happen the instant all four feet are down.

If your timing is good and you catch her with four-on-the-floor several times in a row, you will see her start to stand still deliberately, in order to make the clicker go off. Light bulb! A door has opened in her brain, and you can now see her thinking. To me, this is one of the most exciting moments in dog training – what we sometimes call the "Helen Keller moment," when the dog realizes that she can control the clicker and a whole new world of communication has opened to her. You now have a very powerful tool in your little plastic clicker box. You can use it to reinforce any behavior you want, any time it happens, and your dog will quickly start repeating that behavior for you.

Okay, back to calm. How does "pausing briefly on all four feet" translate into a calm dog? Very gradually. You are going to "shape" the pause into longer and longer periods of stillness, by extending the time, in milliseconds at first, that you wait as she is standing still before you Click! and treat. If you err and she starts to jump around again, just wait. Eventually there will be another pause that you can Click! and then start the shaping again.

As your dog gets better at being calm for longer and longer periods, be sure to reinforce randomly – sometimes for shorter pauses, sometimes longer. If you just keep making it harder and harder – longer and longer – she may get frustrated and quit playing the game.

Each training session should be relatively short, to avoid frustration for both of you, but you can do several in a day. You will have the most success, at least at first, if you practice working on calmness right after one of her exercise sessions, when she is tired anyway. As she gets the idea that "calm" is a very rewardable behavior, it will work even when she has more energy.

When your dog can hold still for several seconds at a time, add the verbal cue of your choice – something like "Easy . . ." that you will eventually be able to use to cue her for calmness. Over time, you will be able to phase out the Click! and treat and use petting and praise as a reward instead of food. Keep your voice and body language calm and soothing to reflect and support her own growing calmness. Petting should be done as a massage – slow kneading or stroking, not vigorous patting or thumping.

#### **4. Establish Your Dog's "Spot"**

You can use a management tether and a clicker to teach your dog a very useful calming exercise, called "Go To Your Spot." Arrange her tether station so it is very comfortable, with a soft bed, really good chew toys, and unspillable water. Toss a treat onto the bed and say "Go to your spot." When she gets there and is about to snatch up the treat, Click! your clicker.

Repeat several times, clicking and treating each time until she goes to her spot easily, and then attach the tether to her collar. Sit in a chair nearby but out of her reach and read a book. If she fusses, ignore her. When she is quiet, Click! and toss her a treat. This is "positive reinforcement" – her good behavior makes something good happen: She gets a Click! and treat.

Occasionally when she is being calm, get up, go over to her bed and quietly pet and praise her (also positive reinforcement). If she starts to get excited when you are with her, go back to your chair and sit down again. This is "negative punishment": her inappropriate behavior makes a good thing – you and your treats – go away. Negative punishment is considered effective and humane by most positive trainers.

When she is calm on her tether for long stretches of time – up to 5 or 10 minutes with occasional treats and visits, remove the tether and continue to reward her for lying calmly on her bed. If she revs up again, re-tether her and practice more calm.

You should also practice this when guests visit. Give your dog an extra tiring play session before they arrive so she can be on her best behavior. If she greets them too enthusiastically, have her go to her spot, tethered if necessary, and wait until she is calm to allow guests to greet her. When she is relaxed, untether her so she can mingle with the visitors politely. If she gets carried away, she can do another session on her tether.

#### **Forced Calming Techniques Can Cause More Harm Than Good**

In recent weeks, I have seen a number of reports of puppies or dogs who began showing aggressive behavior when their handlers used a certain training technique. In several of the cases, the dog owners were confused and upset, because they were using a training method that had been suggested to them by their veterinarian. In each case, the owners had been attempting to get their puppy or dog to "calm down" by either flipping it upside down and holding it to the floor (often referred to as an "alpha roll"), or by holding the pup upside down on their laps.

Here's an excerpt from a letter I received from a woman in Greenville, North Carolina:

"I have a question about my puppy, an eight-week-old mix-breed. She is generally a very good dog, but has made me a little concerned because she has growled at me and bared her teeth. Both times this happened when I was holding her on her back to make her submit. I was told by my veterinarian that if she becomes out of control I should flip her on her back and hold her down until she submits and breaks her gaze away from me. She has made growling noises during play, but hasn't ever bared her teeth before. . ."

In cases like this, it's clear to me that the "alpha roll" has caused the puppy's aggressive behavior, however mild it may be at this point. The alpha roll can greatly exacerbate aggression and, in fact, cause aggression to occur where it otherwise would not have. While some dogs don't take offense at

being rolled over or held down, many others will respond out of fear or resentment, and will begin to fight back in self-defense. The more these dogs are physically forced to behave in a certain way, the more they are likely to display aggression.

I encourage people to forget what they have heard or read about dominance, “making the dog submit,” and “letting the dog know who’s the boss,” because the suggested methods of accomplishing this don’t always end with a useful result. Even if the alpha roll doesn’t trigger a dog’s defense mechanisms, it doesn’t teach her to behave calmly on cue. Some dogs may think of their handlers as “the boss” after being flipped, but so what? It’s more likely, as the writer above found, the dog will come to regard her handler as unpredictable and scary. You also stand a good chance of extinguishing his interest in and willingness to participate in the training.

## **“Positive” Force?**

Some trainers who consider themselves “positive trainers” teach a restraint exercise that I would consider a close relative of the alpha roll. In most variations, the puppies or dogs are gently but forcibly restrained and are rewarded (with a treat or with release) when they stop struggling or hold still. This was described as a “positive training method” because the puppy or dog was rewarded for calming down. However, it’s still a force-based method, one that uses negative reinforcement (the dog’s behavior makes a “bad” thing – the physical restraint – go away).

A better technique for teaching a dog to accept restraint would involve brief periods of restraint that the dog or pup could tolerate – perhaps just a second or two at first – and a Click! and/or a treat during the restraint to reward the dog for her calm behavior. Gradually, as she learns to remain calm while being held, the time that she is held can be increased before she gets the treat. If the dog were to struggle, growl, or exhibit any other unwanted behavior, I would suggest simply letting go and walking away from her, ending the session with a cheery, “Too bad!” Here, she learns that her wriggly or aggressive behavior makes a good thing – your attention and treats – go away. This is referred to as “negative punishment,” and is considered effective and humane by most positive trainers.

However, you’ll notice that the intention of the method is not to teach the dog to be calm, but to accept restraint. To teach a dog to calm herself, I recommend using the completely force and restraint-free method, described in the preceding article. When dogs – just like humans – try different solutions and learn from their voluntary behavior how to succeed in a given situation, that knowledge tends to “stick.” In my experience, dogs who have “learned how to learn” in a low-stress, rewarding environment pick up whatever it is that you want them to do faster than dogs who have been trained with force, and they generalize their knowledge even more rapidly.

## **Change YOUR Behavior**

Fortunately, when people cease and desist from using force-based methods, and begin reinforcing their dogs for good behavior, the “aggression problem” they inadvertently created almost always goes away fairly quickly. Check out this note that I received from a couple in Dayton, Ohio:

“We have read your book, *The Power of Positive Dog Training*, only through Chapter Three and we have already changed the way we view, handle, and speak to our new Labrador puppy, Alex. She’s 15 weeks and our new pride and joy. We adopted her from our local humane society about a month ago.

“At our vet’s suggestion, we’d put Alex in the cradle position for getting hyper, yell “no” when she did something bad, and pinch her under the tongue when she’d bite. I noticed within a week of using these methods that she was hesitant to come near me, afraid to lay with us on the couch, and she began to get more hyper and aggressive.

“I knew there had to be a better way. My fiancé and I began reading your book and instantly stopped all of the above. Alex’s behavior has changed almost overnight. Sure, she still gets into things she’s not supposed to, but now we take responsibility for it and stopped punishing her (after all, we are the ones who dropped socks on the floor). So far she knows that ‘yes’ means treat and she’s learned to sit on cue . . .”

It thrills me to hear stories like this, where a person suddenly sees how easily the use of force can damage a dog’s trust – and how compassionate, intelligent use of learning theory, consistently applied, motivates dogs to offer us their hearts and minds.

## Rewarding Your Way to a Calm Dog

Dogs don’t learn to be calm by being banished to the backyard. Dogs are social creatures, and time spent in isolation causes stress, which frequently causes hyperactivity. Dogs learn to be calm by spending time with people and being rewarded for their calm behavior. Rewards can be attention, praise, petting, and yes, Clicks! and treats.

My evaluation of Whiskey confirmed my suspicions – he was a normal adolescent Labrador with no manners, very trainable for someone with the time, energy, and commitment to teach him how to be calm. His owners are still considering whether they are the right people for him, or whether he would be better off in the home of someone more able to deal with his energy level.

Like so many of the things we expect our dogs to learn, “calm” is easier to teach sooner, rather than later, but it is rarely too late. So, whether you have a puppy rushing around the coffee table or an adolescent who is breaking down your doors, it’s time to get clicking for calm!

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