



Pet Behavior Counseling

Helping you and your pet become best friends for life.

ACCEPTING THE PET YOU HAVE...

Accept the dog you have, not the one you wish you had. This quote, from a presentation entitled: *Relationship: The heart of positive reinforcement training*, by Leslie Nelson of Tails-U-Win! Canine Center in Manchester, CT, was for me, the highlight of 2005 Association of Pet Dog Trainers educational conference. In twelve words, Leslie summed up the essential ingredient to having a happy relationship with your dog.

Sadly, I know many people often wish their dog was different. Countless times I have heard people say things like: "I wish he was more like my old dog," "She's so much noisier than the dog I had as kid," "The breeder said he's not supposed to be like this," "The shelter said he wouldn't run-off," or "She's certainly no Lassie." These are clearly people who are unhappy about their pet. I suspect their pets are not very happy either.

What I call the dreaded "Lassie Myth" is a major reason for many peoples unhappiness. When people compare their personal dog to some "ideal" dog in their mind, they are inevitably disappointed. It is important to remember that the Lassie books, movies and TV shows were all works of fiction. Rin Tin Tin, Eddie, and Wishbone are also fictional characters, not representative of real dogs. Sadly, the mass media frequently sets us up for disappointment by showing us dogs that act more like furry versions of perfect people. When was the last time you saw a perfect person?

Our own egos can also create unhappiness in our relationship. I know I have been guilty of wishing for something my dog was not. Gus, our late Cairn Terrier, was the first dog I trained. As a new trainer I wanted him to be a perfect obedience dog so that I could use him for demonstrations and to "show off" my skills. However, he was a Cairn Terrier, a breed not exactly known for winning obedience competitions.

In my early days as a trainer I naively thought "blind obedience" represented the pinnacle of success and happiness for both trainer and dog. Gus and I drilled and trained and trained and drilled. Together we accomplished a great deal as he was a certified therapy dog, but that was not enough for me. I wanted more. We continued to train until one day fellow trainer Kate Ramsdell made me realize how miserable Gus and I had become. Neither of us were enjoying training because it brought no pleasure,

no fun. It was only then that I started to see how my unrealistic expectations for Gus had seriously damaged our relationship. Fortunately, Gus and I were able to repair our bond, but I will always regret the opportunities for fun that we lost, all because I would not accept him as he was.

All too often, I think many of us that are pet professionals (trainers, veterinarians, breeders, shelter workers, authors,) also perpetuate this lack of acceptance by giving people unrealistic expectations for their dogs. When you want to sell a puppy or adopt a dog into a new home, it is often easier to make them look better than they really are by glossing over any problems. Statements like: "This breed is always good with kids," "Yes, he's completely housetrained," "Your dog will learn everything they need to know in seven weeks," might make it easier to place a pet or to sell a service, but at what price to the dog? By professionals creating unrealistic expectations difficulty in the relationship is essentially guaranteed.

As a pet care professional, I believe my first responsibility to a client is to make sure that they have the knowledge required to understand their pet as it is; a very different species with its own needs and desires. I may not tell them what they want to hear, but I want to make sure they do not have any unrealistic expectations. Secondly, people need to understand that each pet is an individual with its own unique personality. Lastly I want everybody to understand the importance of patience and kindness. With knowledge, patience, and kindness comes acceptance and a furry companion you will cherish forever. You see the key to accepting our pets is no different than accepting one another.

Originally published in Green Acres Kennel Shop P^{aw} Prints, January 2005.

© Donald J. Hanson, CPDT, BFRP