Ah, the dog, *Canis lupus familiaris*, man’s best friend. Dogs are wonderful creatures that bring joy to the lives of many, but for those who have unruly dogs, life may not be so rosy. In fact, behavior problems are the number one cause for euthanasia, more than ALL other disease processes combined. Bad behavior will significantly affect the human-animal bond, and not in a good way. The following information will help you have a better understanding of how a dog’s mind works. Armed with this understanding, we can begin to speak a language that your dog will easily understand, instead of trying to force her to speak your language.

**Family Structure and Communication**

Much has been written about dogs and packs and wolf behavior. While this is not really accurate and is an oversimplification of how things really are, the basic concept is not that far off. Humans and dogs have very similar
social systems. We both live in extended family groups and have extensive parental care. We may not think of canine parental care as extensive because pups are usually weaned at 6 weeks of age and separated from their mothers and littermates at 8 wks of age, but a dog learns how to be a dog and communicate properly with other dogs between 4-8 weeks of age. Other similarities between canine and human social structures include, nursing, using play to develop social skills, the use of verbal and nonverbal communication, and perhaps the most important thing of all is that our social systems are based mainly on deference. Violence is rare among wolves and dogs. We, as humans, often interpret normal, nonviolent canine communication as being violent, but bloodshed is rare and these interactions mostly consist of wrestling and lots of noise (growling, snarling, yelping, etc). The dogs in the picture on the left are playing. Notice how the humans around them are NOT freaking out.

It's All About Deference!
So, what exactly does deference mean? Deference is defined by Webster's dictionary (one of my best friends) to mean respect and esteem due a superior or an elder or affected or ingratiating regard for another's wishes. My definition of deference in this context is having your dog stop whatever she is doing and look at you when you say her name. That's it, stop, sit, and look. Your dog needs to learn to do this in order to get ANYTHING that she values. Dogs are social creatures and will generally do this naturally. The problem arises when they either never learn to do this or when we start to defer to them for a variety of reasons.
The first step of any behavior modification program is deference. Your dog must learn to stop, **look**, and **sit** for anything and everything she values. All dogs need a job, some more than others. Your dog’s new job is to sit and look at you in order to get anything she values. When your dog realizes that all she needs to do is sit to get what she wants, she will begin to offer this behavior, verses jumping up on you, in order to get your attention. You need to be consistent and have her defer to you for everything, food/feeding, treats, love/affection, grooming, going outdoors, coming indoors, having a leash put on, being invited onto the sofa or bed, playing games, playing with toys, having her ears cleaned, anything and everything. Sitting is a less reactive posture than standing and your dog will be better able to focus if she is sitting.
Don't Get Conned
This can be a bit trickier than you may think. For example, you are sitting on the couch watching your favorite program. Your dog walks up to you and puts her chin on your knee, or leans on you, or paws at you. Most people are going to reach out and give her attention without even giving it a second thought. She should have first been asked to sit in order to defer to you and work for something she valued.

Under no circumstances can you pet, touch, or show affection to your dog unless she sits and looks at you first. The sit does not need to be long, 3-5 seconds will do (maybe just 1 second to start with), but eventually you want to stretch it out to 10-15 seconds so she can learn to hold her focus on you. Remember that a puppy’s attention span is very short, so be sure to not ask too much of puppies. When she sits and looks at you attentively, give her a reward and praise/pet her.

All dogs should learn to sit and pay attention to you and no dog is too young or too old to do this. You CAN “teach an old dog new tricks.” A special note for older dogs, if your dog is arthritic it may be difficult for her to sit. If she chooses to lie down instead, that is fine. Lying down is actually a position of greater deference and is an even less reactive posture than sitting. Having your dog defer to you will not make her feel depressed, sad or “dominated.” Dogs are “man’s best friend” for a reason; they want to please us. We need to stop feeling bad for telling them what it is we want and expect from them.
Studies have shown that stress hormone levels are lower in dogs that defer to other dogs or other people. They are less stressed because they do not have to worry about what to do, they just follow your lead. So do your dog a favor and tell her what you want form her 😊.

Banishment Can Help
If you have a dog that has tons of energy and is difficult to manage, it is better to banish her unless you are actively working with her. This sounds harsh, but is only temporary and in the long run will be worth it. A dog like this can be very trying on your patience and tolerance levels. These dogs can wear you down and by doing so, they will learn your weaknesses and hone their skills. This is not the same as withdrawing affection or being mean to her. I would never suggest that. The place of banishment should be one that is comfortable, safe, pleasant, and somewhat enjoyable for your dog. Provide toys for her. She still needs regular exercise and playtime (approximately ten 10-15 minute sessions per day) along with the behavior modification. If there are times that you will not be able to enforce deference, banishment is preferable. Anytime your dog is with you, deference IS A MUST!
How Dogs Learn

Dogs learn best with simple reinforcement (classical and operant conditioning) and through observation. Punishment can also be used to teach, but this is not a desirable approach and can damage the human-animal bond. I will discuss punishment later. The best way to teach your dog is through positive reinforcement. To truly understand this, think of the word positive as adding something to a situation, NOT as something good. For example, I ask my dog to sit, she sits, and I add a reward to the situation (either food, a toy, praise, or whatever motivates her). In this example, what is added to the situation happens to be something good. To further illustrate that positive means adding something to a situation, I will use an example of punishment. What many of us think of as negative reinforcement is actually positive punishment. Say I ask my dog to sit and she does not, I then proceed to give a leash correction (please do not do this). I have added punishment to the situation, i.e. positive punishment. There are also examples of negative (removing something NOT bad) reinforcement and negative punishment, but for the sake of not adding confusion I will not discuss these.

Associations

Dogs learn by forming associations between a behavior and the consequences that occur as a result of that behavior. So, if your dog sits on request and she gets something she likes, the likelihood of her sitting increases. If your dog jumps up on you in an attempt to get your attention and you turn or walk away from her, the likelihood of her continuing to jump up will decrease because she is not getting what she wants (attention).
Anything your dog enjoys or finds valuable can be used as the positive reinforcer. The most common things used with positive reinforcement are food treats, toys, play, and affection. It is important to find which of these motivates your dog. Some things can be too motivating and cause your dog to become fixated on the reward instead of paying attention to you. If that happens, find something a little less motivating. So to recap, if your dog gets something of value as a result of a behavior she is giving, she will likely continue to give that behavior. If she gets nothing or something undesirable, as a result of a behavior she is giving, she will likely stop giving you that behavior.

**Shaping**

If you are shaping behavior with food treats, it is best to work with your dog when she is hungry (before meals). It is also desirable to drain some energy by going for a walk before beginning the training session. This helps to decrease anxiety and will help her focus. For food rewards to be most effective they should not be given randomly throughout the day. They should only be given during training sessions or to reinforce good behavior in general throughout the day. The same concept applies to dogs that are motivated by toys and play.

Be careful to not inadvertently reinforce the wrong behavior. The behavior that you want to reinforce should be rewarded with—in ONE second. For example, say you are trying to teach your dog to come to you. You call her name, she comes over to you, sits, and then you give a treat and praise. What have you rewarded? If you said sit, you are correct. Come was not rewarded because it was not the very last thing she did. The very last thing she did was sit. Get the picture? Your timing has to be on time, every time.
**Winner Winner Chicken Dinner**

Now let's take a moment to discuss reinforcement schedules. There are two ways to reinforce good behavior, continuous and variable. Continuous reinforcement means to give a food reward (or toy, etc) every single time the desired behavior is given. Praise should always be given, even once food rewards are phased out. Use continuous reinforcement when you are trying to shape or teach a new behavior. After your dog reliably gives you what you want 8 out of 10 times, begin to vary the rate of reward (variable reinforcement). Start to give the food reward every other time, then every third, then every fourth, then back to every other, then every fifth, etc... This is the same concept as gambling in people. People do not win every time they gamble (they lose many more times than they win), but they keep doing it on the off chance that they will win. Same concept here, if you give the food reward every single time indefinitely, she will either get bored with it, or you will become dependant on it.

**What Not To Do**

There is a wrong way to reward your dog. We discussed the come/sit example. Other ways we commonly reward unwanted behavior is by scolding our dogs in a happy tone, petting our dogs when they jump up on us, and yelling at our dogs when they are barking. Giving attention to a dog that is jumping up, barking,
scratching at a door, or doing anything else we find undesirable only serves to reinforce the unwanted behavior. I've known people that give their dogs treats in order to get them to stop barking. The treats were given while the dog was barking in an attempt to quiet them. Well, the dog would get quiet for a few seconds while he would chew the treat, but would immediately return to barking, especially once he figured out that he would get a treat every time. This use of food rewards is called a bride. The difference between a bride and a salary is that with a bride, the food comes out BEFORE the desired behavior is given. With a salary, the food comes in to play AFTER the desired behavior is given. A common way that people bride their dog is when the dog is in the back yard and does not want to come inside when called. A lot of people grab the treat box and shake it. It's a quick fix, and will work, but now you are becoming dependant on the food and your dog will not listen to you without the bride.

The Three Dee's
I would now like to talk about distractions, distance, and duration. When trying to teach new behaviors, the time to do it is when you do NOT need it. It is unrealistic to think that you can teach your dog to come to you in the face of great distractions (in the back yard preoccupied by a squirrel, leaf, scent, bird, etc...) and at great distances (all the way across the yard). It is just as unrealistic to expect your dog to learn how to stay at a distance of across the room. You want to minimize all distractions, distances, and durations when trying to teach your dog something new. For example, when teaching stay, start in a quiet room with no TV, radio, other person, or any other distraction. Next, the distance should be small, say 1 foot in front of your dog. Next, the duration should be short, just a few
seconds to begin with. As she gets the hang of things, SLOWLY increase the distance between the two of you, then the duration, then distractions.

You Are What You Eat, So Is Your Dog
Diet is another very important aspect to consider. Feeding your dog a poor quality/cheap diet sets them up for failure. Imagine a human child that eats junk food all day, every day, which is filled with sugar, artificial colors, artificial flavors, and preservatives. How effective do you think he or she will be able to focus, concentrate, and learn? The same goes for your dog. The old adage “you are what you eat” applies to dogs too.

Feeding time is a great opportunity to talk to your dog. What you should say to your dog at this important time is “be calm, and you will get what you want.” This is the underlying theme of everything we want to accomplish and this is one of the best and most important times to convey it. Have your dog in the room with you and have her sit and stay. If she chooses to lie down, that’s fine too. The important thing is that she stays and remains relatively calm. You may have to stop preparing the food 100 times the first day, but stick with it. Because teaching sit and stay in a time with heavy distractions (food) is nearly impossible, you should work on these in advance. The goal here is to get to the point where they sit, stay, and wait while you put the food down, pause, and then give the cue to eat.

Exercise, Exercise, Exercise, and More Exercise!

I cannot stress enough the importance of exercise. Skipping this step sets you and your dog up for failure. All dogs need exercise. The amount will vary depending on age and breed, but all dogs NEED it. The best way to exercise your dog is by walking. To be effective, the walk needs to be structured in a
certain way. A “sniff and pee” walk will not get the job done. Allow your dog to go to the bathroom in the yard (if possible) and then go for a walk. Apartment dwellers may not have this luxury. In this case, allow for elimination in the beginning. After elimination however, it’s time to move. Walk like you are late for an important date! It will be good for your dog physically and mentally. Keeping her nose off the ground will make her much more likely to focus on you and what you are doing/where you are going rather than on the millions of scents her nose will be picking up.

Other forms of exercise include fetch, hide and seek with a toy, and a controlled game of tug. These forms of exercise are meant to supplement the walk, NOT replace it. A special note, running around in the back yard does not help and it does not count as exercise. Even if you have an acre of land, it is essentially a giant kennel and will not stimulate your dog in the same manner that a walk will.

Structure
Dogs are creatures of habit and they thrive on routines and structure. You should provide your dog with as much structure as you can by doing the same things at the same times every single day. I realize that this is not always possible, but do the absolute best that you can. Constant or sudden changes in your dogs’ routine can either cause old unwanted behaviors to reappear or cause new ones to develop.

Check Yourself
Your emotional state is also very important. If you are anxious, nervous, or upset, your dog will pick up on that and will likely give the same behaviors back to you. For example, say you have a dog that reacts by barking, growling, and lunging at other dogs or people when she is out on a leash. Over time, most people start to anticipate this
reaction and begin to prepare for it when they see another dog or person in
the distance. They start to wrap the leash around their wrist, apply tension to the leash, and brace themselves for what is about to happen. Your dog will read the change in your body language and demeanor and will act on it. She will not understand that your demeanor has changed because you are anticipating or reacting to what she is doing or feeling. All she sees is the change. In her eyes, you went from being relaxed to being tense. Your tension came about when her tension came about, so you must be tense about the same thing (approaching stranger). She will not realize that you are tense because of how she reacts to the situation. Staying calm and not reacting is important.

**HOLD ON! Timeout!**

There is only one form of punishment that I recommend, and that is social isolation, or in other words, a timeout. This is not the same as banishment that was mentioned earlier. Dogs are social animals and they want to be around the family, interacting with them. Placing them in another room, behind a closed door, sends a very powerful message that the behavior they were displaying is not appropriate. The timeout is a great tool to use when your dog is in that frenzied state of mind and is not listening to a word you are saying. Speaking louder and yelling do not work. It’s like trying to get someone who doesn’t speak English to understand what you are saying by shouting at them while speaking slower.
You can scream “WHERE IS THE TRAIN STATION?” as loud as you want to a native Italian that doesn’t speak a lick of English, but it will not help!

The time out accomplishes several things. First, it removes the dog from the situation and prevents further learning of your weaknesses. Second, it allows for the opportunity for your dog to calm down. Third, it helps to prevent your dog from ignoring you. If you repeat the same command over and over without your dog responding to it (either because it was not taught properly in the first place or because your dog is too distracted to listen) she will learn to ignore that command (or her name). Next thing you know, you will have to find a new word to use for whatever command your dog has learned to ignore.

To properly use a timeout, I suggest the following. Immediately remove your dog from whatever the situation may be and place her in a relatively boring room, like a spare bathroom. For example, your dog is barking at someone walking past your house and you are unable to stop the behavior with a verbal command. Go to your dog, attach her leash, and bring her to the timeout room. Do not say anything while doing this. She stays in the timeout room until she is quiet. Once she quiets down, open the door. When you open the door, do not say anything to her. Allow her to exit the room and settle down. Once she has settled, then go over to her and pet/praise her. If she exits the room and runs back to the window (or whatever she was focused on) place her back into the room and repeat the process.

Again, this is the ONLY form of punishment that I will ever recommend. Under no circumstances should you ever hit, kick, or otherwise strike your dog. Not even a “tap on the nose” to stop mouthing and biting. I also do not recommend harsh leash corrections. There are better and much more affective ways of getting your dog to listen to you.
**No! Is Not Enough**

We are often very good at saying “NO” or otherwise correcting unwanted behavior. We are usually not so good at rewarding calm behavior that our dogs give us on their own. For example, your dog is lying quietly in a room. Most of the time we do not even give that situation a second thought. This is a great opportunity to give your dog attention when she is calm. Doing so will reinforce calm behavior. Also, just saying “NO” is not good enough. You should always give her something else to do. The something else can be anything, sit, down, and stay are easy things to have her do.

In summary, there are several points to remember:

- Your dog must sit and look at you for anything she wants for the rest of her life.
- If your dog does not listen to you when you ask her to sit, simply walk away from her. She will eventually follow and you will have another opportunity to reinforce deference.
- Do not give in to subtle, pushy, defiant behaviors.
- Expect to get a little frustrated. When this happens, walk away and calm down. Return to your dog once you have settled down.
- Everyone in the house MUST be on the same page and enforce the same structure and set of rules. Inconsistency will undermine the entire operation.
- Harsh punishment and yelling do not work. They only create fear in your dog and will damage the bond between the two of you.
- Watch your body language, your dog most certainly will.
- Timing and consistency are key.
- Dogs thrive with structure, rules, and routines and do not do well with sudden changes and different rules for different family members.
If you follow the recommendations that I have made you will be on the road to a happier and healthier relationship with your dog. Remember that every dog is an individual and they do not all behave and respond the same way, even dogs of the same breed. Also, the first rule of behavior medicine is to make sure there is no underlying medical issue. Your veterinarian is the best person to make that assessment.

Pictures provided by acaben, alert, Amagill, bullcitydogs, Chris Radcliff, Dennis from Atlanta, Earthworm, Fabricio Marcon, findgareth, Malcolm McGrath, Menage a Moi, Mr. T in DC, Nancy~Mesa AZ, nathangibbs, Nicoliosis, nyominx, paul+photos=moody, put that down, sorakirei, voteprime, yogamama via Flickr