

STRUCTURING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR PET

Why: Structure and predictability can be a very important for animals, especially those that suffer from anxiety. By providing guidance to the pet during all interactions and rewarding calm and quiet behavior, you establish a new way of relating to your pet that rewards desirable behavior and provides added structure and predictability for the pet. You are also constantly practicing having your pet respond to your commands when there are relatively few distractions. This will increase the chance that your pet will be able to focus on you when there are distractions present.

When: This program is integrated into your everyday life and all interactions with your pet. It is not to be done during a “special training session” but instead is a fundamental and long-term change in the way you interact with your pet. Every time you interact with your pet, you should first ask the pet to do a command.

Who: All family members should abide by these new rules for pet interaction. All dogs in the home can participate.

How: It is important that the human involved in these interactions remains calm, controlled, and patient. These exercises are not about forcing a dog to respond; it is a simple request and, if completed correctly, compliance is rewarded. Commands should be given in a soft, calm voice—do not shout or repeat commands. Say the pet’s name, then the command, then pause and give the pet a chance to respond. Use commands that your pet knows: For some pets, you may use the sit command frequently. For others, they will have a larger repertoire of commands to select from, such as sit, down, shake, watch me, etc. Noncompliance is not rewarded; essentially the dog is ignored for noncompliance. However, you can try giving another command in a few minutes. Once the dog “learns” the new system, they are usually very compliant.

Giving attention to your pet: Attention-seeking behaviors such as pawing, barking, meowing, jumping up, etc., should be ignored—no attention should be given. This includes eye contact, touching, or speaking to the pet. Attention should not be given on demand, but either for compliance with a command as described above or when the pet is calm and quiet. If your pet is asking for attention by standing or sitting quietly, ask the pet to comply with a command and then pet them. The goal is not to ignore the pet, but rather ignore the attention-seeking behaviors. If this is too difficult, try a signaled nonattention time. For a set period of time (perhaps using a timer), you will not pay any attention to your pet’s demands for attention. To help the pet understand what is happening, you can also add a signal such as a towel or blanket on your lap. When the time begins, place the towel on your lap and ignore the pet. When the time limit has ended, remove the towel. For the rest of the time try to ignore attention-seeking attempts and have your pet earn all things. As your pet learns what the signal means, they often will go lay down when they see the towel come out.

Structured interactive time: All pets need social interactions, play, exercise, and grooming. Make sure to incorporate these into your regular routine on a predictable

basis. If the pet knows that play time, a walk, or petting are forthcoming, they often can be relaxed and calm at other times.

What: As a general rule, your pet should be given a command before engaging in all interactions. This includes giving any attention, food, access to new areas, etc., to your pet. While many people are “trained” to give a command to their dog before giving a treat or a meal, most people give away attention for free. Therefore, you may need to focus on making sure you request a command prior to all social interactions with your pet. Listed below are four possible responses from the pet and the recommended human reaction to these responses. Also noted are common errors in human response that you should avoid.

Dog’s response to command	Human action	Avoiding common errors
Your dog responds immediately to your command.	Provide the dog with a reward. The reward may be attention, food, access to a different area, etc.	Some people reward noncompliance—don’t do this!
Your dog does not respond to the command.	Give no reward and terminate interaction with dog (e.g., look away, walk away, etc.).	Do not repeat command multiple times. Do not physically manipulate dog into compliance. Do not inflict interactive punishment for noncompliance.
Your dog anticipates the command and performs it before your request.	Ask the dog to perform another command prior to rewarding.	Don’t reward the action if you didn’t give the command; these exercises are intended to improve leadership and encourage the dog to look to humans for direction.
Your dog exhibits aggression either during the command request or during delivery of reward.	Aggression always results in social isolation. Immediately turn away from the dog and exit the area or put the dog in a time-out spot until it has calmed down. This social isolation is a form of punishment and gives the dog a chance to calm down.	Do not interactively punish the dog: aggressive dogs are aroused, and interactive corrections may serve to escalate the aggression. If the dog is aggressing, trying to escort it to a time-out spot may be dangerous. If this is the case, just leave the dog alone where the incident occurred.