



## Leadership and Your Dog, Part 3: Deb's List of Attitude-Adjusters and Relationship-Builders

**Author's Note, 2018:** *When I first wrote this article years ago, it was for my students who expressed frustration and worry about their challenging dogs—who were also often “difficult” breeds (e.g. German Shepherds). Many informational sources had advised them to become “alpha”—and so they resorted to techniques such as rolling their dogs on their backs, pinning them, restricting food and water, using painful training equipment, and even biting them on the nose! They feared their dogs were out of control (or even aggressive), and felt that the relationship with their dogs could not be changed without force and punishment. I do not write this in judgment; I’ve done a few alpha rolls and scruff shakes in my lifetime—before I learned a safer, kinder—and even more effective—way.*

The techniques in this article work well for realizing **peace and harmony** in all sorts of dog-human relationships, establishing the human as a **kind, benevolent leader**, and raising a dog that is a **joy to live with**.

If you're here because you have a challenging dog, your dog is out of control, you want to start off on the right foot with a new dog, or simply want to better you and your dog's relationship, read on.

This is a three-part article. All three parts are available in the library at [www.goldstardog.com](http://www.goldstardog.com).

### **Part 1: What's Wrong with Me and My Dog?**

- I feel like my dog wants to be the boss!
- Is it dominance?
- What IS the problem?
  - Understanding how dogs operate and learn
  - The four main reasons dogs do things humans hate

### **Part 2: Build a Crazy Great Relationship with Your Dog**

- So what can I DO about my dog's behavior and build a crazy-awesome relationship with my dog?
  - Three key concepts for the human—including how this all translates to a training approach
  - Understanding punishment and discipline

### **Part 3: Deb's List of Attitude-Adjusters and Relationship-Builders**

- My list of attitude-adjusters and relationship-builders—practical, applicable advice for day-to-day life with your dog
- Things you can do every day to have a respectful, well-behaved, happy dog

## RECAP...Parts 1 and 2:

**Key learning points from Part 1 include:**

1. **It's not dominance.** The issues you may be having with your dog—from not coming when called, to guarding his/her stuff, to even fearful and aggressive behavior—are not dominance-driven.



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2. **Then what is the problem?** In my work with dogs and humans, these are the four most common reasons why dogs act in ways that humans don't appreciate: lack of training, unclear (or inconsistent) guidance, lack of exercise and mental stimulation, and fear- and stress-related issues.
3. **So, what does all of this mean for you and your dog?** Your dog is not an anarchist. Your dog is not out to get you. Your dog is not stupid or untrainable. Dogs communicate and can be communicated with (hence, there's hope!).

## **Key learning points from Part 2 include:**

1. **Dogs have needs.** The more successful we are in meeting our dogs' needs, the easier they will be to live with.
2. **Dogs communicate.** Learning to read our dog's body language gives us critical information straight from the source—information we can use to teach our dogs; react to issues we are seeing; and deepen our relationship with, and understanding of, our dogs.
3. **Leadership is not about being alpha or being a pack leader, or dominating our canine companions.** It is not about physical confrontation and force. It is about being a clear, consistent, benevolent teacher. You have a choice in the leadership style you choose to use with your dog. What will you choose?
4. **Punitive methods (and equipment used in a punitive way)—meant to “correct” behavior—may give the false impression of a quick-fix.** And while effective levels of force and punishment may in fact suppress unwanted behavior, the risks for side effects are high. Punishment can actually cause some dogs to seem willful and stubborn, and even aggressive if they feel like they need to defend themselves when punished—when what these dogs are actually feeling is frustration, confusion, and/or fear.
5. **Positive does not mean permissive.** Just because you aren't using force, pain, domination, does NOT make you a doormat. You are still in charge. You control your dog's access to resources. You set the schedule. You determine the house rules. You decide the consequences for poor behavior. You are not LOSING control by being a benevolent, gentle leader who chooses relationship- and positive-based methods. You are instead choosing to teach dogs in a kind but also highly effective way that capitalizes on how they really learn and function— and takes full advantage of that knowledge.

## **Deb's List of Attitude-Adjusters and Relationship-Builders You Can Do Every Day**

The advice below will help your dog understand what is expected, and will help you convey these expectations to the dog. The beauty of all of the techniques is that they can do no harm—in fact, they are a good idea if you want to have the dog's respect and cooperation.

1. **Create enough opportunities for exercise and mental stimulation.** Everything works much better if the dog gets daily exercise at the level s/he needs. Keeping him mentally stimulated with kongs or puzzles when he's alone and with obedience and games when he's with you goes a long way to a tired, happy dog.
  - Go for walks but also have off-leash romps (safely—in a fenced yard, away from traffic, etc.)
  - Find a training class and/or participate in dog sports or activities (if you're reading this as part of a class handout—you can give yourself a gold star for this one!)
  - Search the internet or get a book of tricks and brain games
  - Buy (or make!) some puzzle games for your dog
  - Try the “Something New” and “Find Me” games in the library at [www.goldstardog.com](http://www.goldstardog.com)
2. **Draw up the guidelines and rules—and teach them with rewards and appropriate consequences (when needed).** Consistent rules are a must...and this means consistent, firm, calm follow-through as well. Pushy



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dogs especially need clear boundaries and consequences. You set the rules, and you decide what is acceptable and what is not. Whatever your dog does must result in the same predictable response from you.

- What are the rules around every facet of your dog's life? Is he allowed on furniture? Is he permitted at the table when the humans are eating? Where does he sleep? Is he allowed to jump on humans to greet them?
  - Write them down. Share and discuss with people (family members, dog sitters, etc.) who regularly interact with your dog.
  - This gives you a very clear roadmap of what you expect, ensures all of the humans are on the same page, and gives you a very clear picture of what you should reward and reinforce.
  - In a nutshell—if you like something your dog did, reward it! If you don't like what your dog did, don't reward it (and don't allow your dog to reward himself—like stealing a steak off the counter!)
3. **[Learn to read your dog's body language.](#)** As we've learned in the article thus far, there are many important benefits to being able to understand what your dog is thinking and feeling—and reacting to what we do with and to them.
- Check out the list of reading materials and websites for learning about dog body language at the end of this article.
  - Attend one of my “Woof! What is the dog saying?” lectures on body language (offered throughout the state year-round; see the schedule: <https://www.goldstardog.com/woof>)
4. **[Educate your dog and give him the skills to behave \(training!\).](#)** Having a firm grasp of basic obedience goes a long way in building your role as leader AND in developing a healthy relationship with your dog.
- Walking nicely on leash, coming when called, looking at you when asked, learning to leave things or drop things...all of these skills are useful for everyday life with your dog! (check out the library for training articles and videos: <https://www.goldstardog.com/visit-the-library/>)
  - Positive training methods are a must! Seek out a book, video, trainer, or training class that can help you apply these methods.
5. **[Control access to resources.](#)** Not allowing free access to toys, treats, furniture, your bed, your lap, and other resources your dog enjoys can also help the pushy dog understand boundaries.
- Resources are controlled by, and given access to, by you—after your dog “says please” it (see “sit for stuff” below). This does not mean withholding food and water! Access to water should never be restricted.
  - Before you feed your dog, or before your dog wants anything, ask him to sit or wait—see next bullet!
6. **[Employ the “Sit for Stuff” system every day with your dog.](#)** Ask your dog to sit anytime s/he wants something from you (before dinner/treats, before throwing a ball, before getting a toy or bone, before being patted, etc.).
- Your dog should offer you something for everything s/he wants from you—affection, food, life rewards, toys, attention.
  - This does NOT mean that you should WITHHOLD things that your dog needs.
  - In no way does your dog get anything it wants from you for pushy behaviors such as barking, pushing, nipping, body checks, growling, jumping on you, etc.
7. **[Be careful with games that encourage aggressive or unruly behavior.](#)** Use caution with games that encourage excited horseplay, chasing, and biting—dogs can easily forget boundaries in the excitement! Games like tug aren't automatically off limits, but make sure you are not rewarding rude behavior (jumping, biting, pawing, etc.) by making it part of a game.
- Teach your dog to drop or give items when you ask
  - Ask your dog to practice self-control by asking for a sit before you throw a ball or stick
  - Take breaks when the energy level gets too high and/or your dog forgets his manners



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8. **Acknowledge deferential behaviors and reward them.** Any time your dog shows you respect or deference, notice and reward it (does not have to be food rewards, but anything your dog finds pleasurable...a pat, a ball toss, a kind word).
  - Actions that show respect or deference include moving out of the way for you, sitting politely to ask for something, looking at or to you (noticing you exist—see the next bullet), doing anything you ask, not pawing or barking at you. Basically, if it feels like your dog is being polite, reward it!
9. **Encourage your dog to notice you.** Anytime your dog is aware you exist is a good thing and anytime your dog looks to you (deference! partnership!) for guidance is a wonderful thing. When your dog does these things, verbally praise him for it.
  - A dog that doesn't know you exist is difficult to teach; encouraging your dog to look at you builds trust and connection.
  - You can also teach your dog to look at you on command. When your dog is proficient at looking at you when you ask, you can use this as a tool to refocus your dog when s/he is distracted, or redirect him/her from unwanted behavior (barking, lunging, staring, etc.).
10. **Be hyper-aware of what you are rewarding (even unintentionally).** Dogs do what works for them. So, if whining or barking gets them the food dish faster, they will do it. If pulling on the leash gets them to where they want to go, they will pull. If jumping all over you gets your attention, they will continue to jump! Think about potential negative behaviors you may unintentionally be rewarding in your day-to-day interactions with your dog.
  - **On the flip side, think of all the times your dog may be doing the right things and you DON'T notice and reward it.** If we did NOTHING else but reward the behavior we want, our dogs would become well-behaved and fit in with our house rules. Rewarding a dog for good behavior is a powerful training tool and behavior modifier.
  - Be careful not to use rewards (especially food treats) as bribes. The dog does not get a reward until he complies with whatever you have asked of him. Doing daily short obedience exercises can be part of this—you ask him to do something, and when he DOES, he gets some sort of reward. This delivers the subtle yet powerful message that you're the leader.
  - Generally, when your dog engages in behavior you don't like (like mouthing, biting, jumping on you, barking at you), use a FIRM and quick verbal interruption (eh eh) at the moment it starts and turn away from him (turn back to your dog and praise when the behavior stops—this gives your dog two pieces of information: what behavior you don't like and what behavior will earn your attention). Or, give him a command you know he will do (giving him a reason to earn reward and disrupting the behavior you don't like).
11. **Handle and groom frequently.** Handling your dog's body is another way to gently assert that you are the leader—and a great way to bond with your dog. Groom and gently handle your dog regularly. Seek help if you are getting aggressive responses—do not attempt this technique without help in this case.
12. **Avoid physical confrontation.** Avoid trying to battle issues out with your dog physically—dogs are strong and quick, and armed with teeth and powerful jaws. And, it's just not effective! Avoid situations that will provoke your dog into acting out and where you may be tempted to respond with physical force; these situations often escalate out of control and worsen over time. Also, physical punishment may stop a behavior but in the long term may worsen underlying behavioral causes.
13. **HAVE FUN WITH YOUR DOG.** Don't forget the fun! Playing with your dog solidifies the bond between you and encourages your dog to see you as someone he or she LIKES to be around.

If your dog is behaving aggressively, or you feel threatened, or the situation seems to be escalating, seek out professional help. Often, your veterinarian can be an excellent resource for where to seek this help and can assess potential physical or medical reasons for your dog's issues. I can also help point you in the right direction.



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## [Learn more about dog body language and dog safety](#)

### Talks/Lectures:

- Attend one of my “Woof! What is the dog saying?” lectures on body language (offered throughout the state year-round; see the schedule: <https://www.goldstardog.com/woof>)

### Recommended Websites

- Doggone Safe: <http://doggonessafe.com>
- Stop the 77: <http://stopthe77.com/>
- Pet Professional Guild, Canine Advocacy: <https://petprofessionalguild.com/Canine-Advocacy>

### Recommended Books

- On Talking Terms With Dogs Calming Signals (Turid Rugaas)
- Canine Behavior: A Photo Illustrated Handbook (Barbara Handelman)
- Canine Body Language: A Photographic Guide Interpreting the Native Language of the Domestic Dog (Brenda Aloff)

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